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Entrepreneurial Identity and Agency

The identity work and discursively constructed agency of entrepreneurs in Helsinki

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Abstract

Entrepreneurship and Startup-culture has seen significant growth both within Aalto University and Finnish society as a whole. Manifestations of this can be seen in the emergence of Startup growth accelerators, entrepreneurship societies, and Startup events such as SLUSH. Consequently, the meanings and practices of startup entrepreneurship have increasing cultural significance in relation to consumer society.

This study examines the identification and identity work of entrepreneurs within the Aalto entrepreneurial ecosystem through the ways that they talk about themselves as entrepreneurs and engage in discursive identity work. Through this discourse, this study aims to investigate how entrepreneurs establish themselves as having and acting with agency in an environment that is both infused with expectations of enormous growth and loaded with pitfalls and structural constraints.

A constructionist ontological perspective is adopted in order to investigate how individuals themselves construct their reality and identity through discourse. This perspective is by nature open to subjectivities, and care is taken to present informants' views with minimal and managed author bias. Long interviews were conducted with twelve informants in an unstructured fashion with a list of themes and prompts in order to ensure that findings represented informants' own thoughts.

Informants' identity talk regarding their entrepreneurial identification reflect a division between informants who construct themselves as entrepreneurial through achieving measurable success in KPIs, triumphing over obstacles, and developing themselves as entrepreneurs, as well as informants who construct themselves as entrepreneurial through an engagement in collective problem-solving, creating social impact, and self-fulfillment. This division of strategies – though with some overlap – reflects how informants seek to construct themselves as entrepreneurs either through a capacity for individual agency or through a communion and interaction with other entrepreneurs.

The environment in which many entrepreneurs operate is laden with dangers of personal and financial failure and constraints, and in attempting to discursively construct themselves as agentic – a virtual prerequisite in entrepreneurship – many entrepreneurs encounter a tension between their reality and entrepreneurial discourse. The themes of *agency* and *communion* emerge as methods for informants to be entrepreneurial and agentic, and in discursively constructing themselves as having agency also achieve a sense of personal and entrepreneurial agency. The increasing influence of entrepreneurial thought in post-modern society highlights the significance of understanding how entrepreneurial discourse necessitates the appearance and sense of agency in spite of any constraining realities.

Keywords Agency, Discourse, Entrepreneurship, Identity Work

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Yrittäjyyden ja startup-kulttuurin merkitys sekä Aalto-yliopistossa että suomalaisessa yhteiskunnassa laajemmin on kasvanut nopeasti. Tästä esimerkkeinä ovat erinäisten startup-kasvuhautomojen, yrittäjyyttä edistävien järjestöjen ja tapahtumien kuten SLUSH:in syntyminen. Yrittäjyyteen liittyvät merkitykset ja toimintatavat vaikuttavat alakulttuurina entistä enemmän kuluttajayhteiskuntaan.

Tässä tutkimuksessa selvitetään yrittäjien identifioitumista ja identiteettityötä Aalto-yliopiston startup-ekosysteemissä analysoimalla miten yrittäjät puhuvat itsestään yrittäjinä ja työstävät identiteettiään diskursiivisesti. Yrittäjien ja yrittämisen diskurssin kautta pyritään ymmärtämään, miten yrittäjät luovat itselleen toimijuutta ja itsestään aktiivisia toimijoita ympäristössä jossa on samanaikaisesti valtavia menestystoiveita ja rajoittavia rakenteellisia tekijöitä.

Tutkimuksessa hyödynnetään konstruktionististä ontologista näkökulmaa jotta yrittäjien diskurssin kautta rakentamaa subjektiivista todellisuutta ja identiteettiä voidaan analysoida. Näkökulma on luonnostaan avoin subjektiiviselle tulkinnalle, joten yrittäjien ajatukset pyritään esittämään tutkijasta riippumattomasti mahdollisimman vääristymättä. Tutkimusta varten haastateltiin yhteensä kahtatoista yrittäjää pitkissä avoimissa haastatteluissa tietysitä teemoista, jotta yrittäjien identifioituminen välittyisi mahdollisimman pitkälti oma-alotteisesti.

Haastateltujen yrittäjien identiteettityö heijastaa jakoa yrittäjiin jotka kokevat yrittäjyyden tavotteiden saavuttamisena, haasteiden voittamisena ja yrittäjinä kehittymisenä, ja toisaalta yrittäjiin jotka kokevat yrittäjyyden yhteisöllisenä ongelmien ratkaisemisena, yhteiskunnallisena vaikuttamisena ja itsensä toteuttamisena. Näiden kahden joissain määrin päällekkäisen strategian kautta yrittäjät pyrkivät rakentamaan itselleen toimijuutta joko yksilön toiminnan ja toimijuuden tai yhteisöllisen toiminnan ja yhteenliittymisen kautta.

Ympäristössä jossa yrittäjät toimivat on monia vaaroja ja rajoitteita, niin rahallisia kuin henkilökohtaisia, ja luodessaan itsestään vaikutelman toimijoina yrittäjät kohtaavat jännitteen yrittäjyyden mahdollistavan diskurssin ja todellisuuden välillä. Yksilön toimijuuden tai yhteisöllisyyden painottamisen kautta yrittäjät voivat rakentaa itsestään kuvan aktiivisina toimijoina ja näin myös luoda itselleen toimijuutta yksilöinä ja yrittäjinä. Yrittämisen diskurssin ja alakulttuurin leviäminen laajemmin postmoderniin yhteiskuntaan korostaa miten tärkeää on ymmärtää yrittäjyyden diskurssia ja sen luomaa oletusta toimijuudesta riippumatta rakenteellisita rajoituksista.

Avainsanat toimijuus, diskurssi, yrittäjyys, identiteettityö

CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION

> *Informant #5: "I ended up being an entrepreneur by accident because of the bankruptcy. I really haven't made that decision, it has grown on me. Nowadays I would feel more stressed working for someone else than working for me. Or at least the stress would be very different, as an early stage entrepreneur it is running away from running out of runway or bankruptcy. There is this financial stress, but work related stress is very, very low for me. I would be much more stressed working in a large company with a small silo, and seeing there are so many things in this company that don't work."*

1.1 Research Idea and Theoretical Founding

The purpose of this study is to explore how startup entrepreneurs in Helsinki engage in identity work through a discourse of entrepreneurship. Through their identity work, entrepreneurs discursively construct a sense of agency and manage the dominating – and enabling – power of entrepreneurial discourse as presented through myths and meanings engrained into society and its cultural consciousness.

Exploring the identity and identification of individuals engaged in entrepreneurship allows for a deeper examination of their motivations and interest in entrepreneurship. While the nature of identity and identification can be approached from many different ontological positions, the concept of *identity work* as an ongoing process of maintaining and crafting ones identity is a prevalent one in marketing and Consumer Culture Theory research (Alvesson et al., 2008). Identity work as an understanding of identification sees individuals as proactive interpreters who display agency in forming an identity from various cultural resources and discourses, though also as being limited and constrained by discourse, consumer culture, and available cultural resources (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). This interpretation of agentic identification bears striking resemblance to the context of entrepreneurship, as entrepreneurs are – in a religious and mythological parallel – seen as agents of change, creating something new and novel from the old (Sørensen, 2008).

Consumer Culture Theory research investigates the culturally and socially situated nature of marketing and consumer research in an attempt to take into consideration non-positivistic, post-structural, and constructionist epistemological and ontological positions (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). This research stream is characterized by more qualitative research methods and broader understandings of the role of consumption in society.

As such, Consumer Culture Theory views on what constitutes consumption are broader than more orthodox or literal interpretations, such as those centered on physical consumption or spending money. In fact, consumption can be seen to include, as a cultural and social practice, significant aspects of identification as well as the transmission and creation of cultural messages. These can be characterized using Consumer Culture Theory terminology as consumer identity projects and mass-mediated marketplace ideologies respectively (Arnould & Thompson, 2005).

The identification of entrepreneurs, like many other types of identification, is characterized by the consumption of various meanings and practices and situated in a cultural and societal context that is mediated through consumption. Adopting a Consumer Culture Theory-perspective, and working with theory from research related to identity and identification as well as entrepreneurship, the identification of entrepreneurs may be evaluated from a consumption perspective relevant to marketing and consumer research.

Deeper understanding regarding the identity work and identification of entrepreneurs may be gained in drawing from identity work research from management and organization theory. By investigating the nature and processes of identity and identification (Brown, 2015; Brown, 2017), and accounting for the existence and influence of discourse (Thornborrow and Brown, 2009), more nuanced understanding of entrepreneurs identification may be gained. The influence of mythical representations and ideological bias in entrepreneurship (Ogbor, 2000) may be investigated in the context of a discourse, and the particularities of the role of agency in entrepreneurs' identification and context are considered.

Moisander and Valtonen (2006) argue that discussing research methodology is only meaningful in qualitative research if the underlying ontological and epistemological assumptions are discussed as well. The research paradigm of this research revolves around ontological and epistemological understanding founded on constructionism, in that reality is seen to be subjectively perceived and created by an individual in a social and cultural context (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008).

As this research is focused on investigating the identity work undertaken by entrepreneurs, discourse analysis presents itself as the most promising methodological standpoint to adopt. Discourse analysis focuses on understanding the shared meanings and practices that constitute a particular way of understanding and communicating a topic, for example entrepreneurship (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). Moisander and Valtonen (2006) draw attention to the different philosophical standpoints that may be adopted to studying discourse. Discourse may either be studied on a macro level through

societal and cultural understandings of a discourse, or on an individual and subjective level as what individuals construct and participate in discourse. Jørgensen and Phillips (2002) also note that the aspect of power is relevant in all research on discourse, and that discourses must be seen as power structures that affect, limit, and enable participants' identity work. McCracken's (1988) method for conducting long, unstructured, and qualitative interviews is employed as a useful tool for navigating the risks of researcher bias and subjectivity, as well as in providing structure to the analysis of informants' complex identity talk.

McAdams' (2001) notion of using agency and communion – presented as fundamental dualities of human existence – in characterizing identity work is adopted as a means of presenting findings thematically. Informant's comments and identity talk is presented according to the themes of McAdams' (2001) agency and communion, as this presents a solid theoretical foundation for informant's general views regarding entrepreneurship. Additionally, the discursive nature of the methodological founding in this research requires an interpretative lens that emphasizes the way individuals identify through themes such as agency and communion which are accessed through available discourses.

1.2 Purpose of the Study and Contributions

Consumer Culture Theory research has taken a broader perspective on consumption than more quantitatively oriented mainstream marketing research or consumer research, as it takes as a starting point the notion that consumption forms an intrinsic part of society and a medium for culture (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Although Consumer Culture Theory research has embraced considerable latitude in research contexts – sometimes even to the point of being questioned by more orthodox marketing and consumer research (Arnould & Thompson, 2005) – and contributed to new streams of thought regarding the nature and role of consumption in identity and identification, a focus on the specific processes and structures that make up and affect identity and identification has not received extensive attention (see Arsel & Thompson, 2011; Thompson, 2004).

Identity Work as a method of understanding how identity is created and maintained is a useful perspective in considering how entrepreneurs may perceive themselves in the context of dominant discourses in entrepreneurship. By exploring how entrepreneurs talk about themselves and their

entrepreneurial selves, understanding regarding their entrepreneurial identification and their perception of entrepreneurial discourse may be gained.

The concept of Identity Work as a means of exploring identification is used both in Consumer Culture Theory research and more broadly in organizational theory research. The use of Identity Work in Consumer Culture Theory research varies somewhat on the perspective taken in regards to the agentic capability of individuals. In reference to Arnould and Thompson's (2005) summary of the main streams of Consumer Culture Theory research, the stream of *Consumer Identity Projects* and *Mass-Mediated Marketplace Ideologies and Consumers' Interpretative Strategies* position the individual as either fundamentally agentic or as fundamentally subject to cultural frameworks respectively. While there is diversity regarding individuals capacity for agency in research in these two streams of Consumer Culture Theory research, the division displays a broader division of thought regarding individuals capacity for agency in Consumer Culture Theory research, something that is more explicitly discussed in for example organizational theory research (Brown, 2015).

The initial focus on agentic capability in identity research is visible in Arnould and Thompson's (2005) summary of *Consumer Identity Projects*: "Consumer culture theory concerns the coconstitutive, coproductive ways in which consumers, working with marketer-generated materials, forge a coherent if diversified and often fragmented sense of self", as well as in more or less agentic descriptions of individuals using objects and others to create an extended self (Belk, 1988). A more explicit focus on the dominating power of social structures and discourse on individuals identity work is discussed by for example Arsel and Thompson (2011) and Üstüner and Holt (2007) in describing how individuals must conduct their identity work in the context of broader – and potentially dominating – social discourses and with limited social and cultural resources.

As mentioned, the nature of identity is the question of considerable debate – more so in organizational theory than Consumer Culture Theory research – regarding structure and agency, stability and fluidity, coherence and fragmentation, positive and negative identities, and authenticity (Brown, 2015). The nature of identification and identity work (see Alvesson et al., 2008) and common approaches to identity work (see Brown, 2017) are also useful in examining entrepreneurs' identification. Additionally, the effect of discursive frameworks in enabling and limiting the scope of identity and identification is relevant to investigating the nature and role of entrepreneurial discourse (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002).

Entrepreneurship, entrepreneurial identities, and entrepreneurial discourse are not extensively represented in identity work or Consumer Culture Theory literature, although the identification and identities of entrepreneurs have been investigated by among others Fauchart and Gruber (2011), Down and Warren (2008), and Watson (2009a). This leaves room for more research regarding specifically entrepreneurship in identity work- and Consumer Culture Theory-oriented research.
As both Ogbor (2000) and Rehn et al. (2013) find, entrepreneurship both as an academic field and as represented in society and culture is strongly biased ideologically. Entrepreneurial research, as well as myths, conceptions and clichés regarding entrepreneurship, are affected by historical and mythological bias (see Bird, 1992; Sørensen, 2008; McMullen, 2017) that lead from the realist roots of entrepreneurial knowledge and research. In other words, current truths and 'knowns' regarding entrepreneurship are not questioned and examined as being constituted subjectively and discursively with a strong historical influence (Ogbor, 2000).

As entrepreneurship is a context with a rich, vivid, and strong discourse which has only relatively recently been extensively critically examined, entrepreneurship provides a rich context for conducting Consumer Culture Theory and identity work research. The increasing influence and use of entrepreneurial discourse in society and management (Nicholson & Anderson, 2005; Alvesson et al., 2008; Watson, 2008) point to the social relevancy of understanding how entrepreneurial discourse limits and enables identification by the increasing number of people being affected by this discourse.

Additional relevancy and access is provided by the increase in entrepreneurial discourse, particularly regarding start-up culture in Finland, as exemplified by the rapid growth and status achieved by SLUSH, a major start-up event organized annually in Helsinki.

1.3 Research Questions

The research idea is focused into a specific research questions regarding identity work among entrepreneurs:

What sorts of entrepreneurial identities do entrepreneurs construct?

This question aims to open up entrepreneurs' identity work in relation to common debates in relevant literature and concepts. Analyzing entrepreneurs' identity talk will enable examination of how various means of consumption – such as the consumption of marketplace meanings – affect entrepreneurs, as well as how discursive frameworks mediate, limit, and enable the scope and nature of their identity work.

1.4 Context

With changing attitudes towards entrepreneurship in Finnish society since the 2008 Financial Crisis and the 2011 Eurozone Crisis contributing towards almost a decade of sluggish economic growth, entrepreneurship is seen as an increasingly viable career path (Kauppalehti, 2017).

Entrepreneurship has seen a surge in interest in Finland in the 2010's, with more start-ups and publicity in media. Organizations such as Aalto Entrepreneurship Society have led a boom in Silicon Valley inspired start-up culture, contributing to the birth of events such as Slush, known today internationally as a major start-up event and brand. Start-up culture emphasizes the scalability of business models and a global approach to doing business, and consequently many startups are in the technology sector where digital business models naturally allow for scalability and a global reach.

Entrepreneurship has gained a significant boost in the last decade in and around the Aalto University entrepreneurial ecosystem, spurred on by organizations such as the Aalto Entrepreneurial Society and by events such as Slush. Increasingly the university as well has recognized and sought to support entrepreneurial activity surrounding the university. These factors have contributed to creating a vibrant entrepreneurial ecosystem around the university, as well as making it one of the most active in Finland. This presents both an interesting context for study, as well as the opportunity to study it.

Within the ecosystem are a myriad actors and individuals, ranging from diverse backgrounds, all drawn to entrepreneurship. What motivates all these individuals and actors to participate and strive to be entrepreneurial?

This is something that this thesis seeks to illuminate, as well as shed light on what motivations and attitudes various individuals have towards entrepreneurship.

1.5 Findings and Conclusions

Informants' identity talk and identification in the context of entrepreneurship was interpreted with the use of McAdam's (2001) notions of agency and communion, with informants portraying their image of entrepreneurship and themselves as an entrepreneur in terms of respectively either self-mastery, status and victory, achievement and responsibility, and empowerment or friendship and love, dialogue, caring for others, and sense of community.

Informants discussed their personal motivations for engaging in entrepreneurship, how they viewed success in entrepreneurship, as well as more fundamental questions regarding the nature of entrepreneurship. Informants generally viewed motivations as fulfilling desires and passions or as becoming successful, success measures as either social benefit and impact or growth and market validation, and the nature of entrepreneurship as either communal or individualistic.

A discourse of entrepreneurship as presented by for example Ogbor (2000) or Watson (2009a) was identifiable in informant's comments, and formed a structure of power that both enabled and limited informants' identity work (Thornborrow and Brown, 2009). The nature and possession of agency forms a significant part of an entrepreneurial discourse, and as such informants' own agency and – crucially – sense of agency emerged as a significant finding in this research.

Informants live and conduct identity talk in a context that both enables and limits an individual's agency – reflecting a broader question of individual agency versus structural influence – but because of its entrepreneurial nature privileges agency as a desirable trait and power. Informants' identity talk may be viewed as a type of discursive construction of agency which in itself may be viewed as a form of agency.

The findings that emerged from informant's identity talk are indicative of how entrepreneurial discourse may affect identification, and in the context of increasing entrepreneurial discourse in society (Watson, 2009a; Alvesson et al., 2008) of how entrepreneurial valuations and prototypical images in discourse may become stronger in society. While the balance between individual agency and structural influences are a staple of identity research across all contexts, the specific emphasis – even obsession – with the capacity for agency that exists in entrepreneurial discourse sets it apart. In line with potentially greater demand for individual agency and exhortation towards agentic power over structural constraints in broader society, investigation of the tension between embodying agency through discursive construction of one's identity and the fundamental difficulty in employing in Campbell's (2009) agentic power over power of agency becomes pressing.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section the literature relevant for the research questions will be reviewed. First, a brief background of Consumer Culture Theory will be presented, as it forms the theoretical link to marketing research and differentiates it from more positivist streams of marketing research. Next, identity research in Consumer Culture Theory will be examined and compared to management and organizational research on identity work that has provided example and precedent. Then, the nature of identification and identity work, as well as the nature of discourse will be examined in order to explain how entrepreneurs' identification can be approached and examined. Finally, the nature of agency within discourse and of entrepreneurial myths and bias will be discussed in order to illuminate the basis from which entrepreneurial discourse and entrepreneurs draw.

2.1 Identity

Research surrounding identity in fields such as organizational studies and management has seen significant growth in recent years as the potential of studying identity has been recognized (Alvesson et al., 2008), with the boldest proponents of the trend predicting significant advances across fields of research that touch on identity such as the social sciences, humanities and philosophy (Brown, 2015).

Identity has been a central focus of philosophers and thinkers since ancient times all the way enlightenment philosophers, leading to an increasingly scientific and structured understanding of identity beginning around the beginning of the 20th century. Modern and post-modern societies have given people greater scope to understand and construct their identities due to the decreasing significance of for example religion, social class, or societal norms as defining means of understanding identity. These changing societal conditions have affected the increasing interest in identity in academia, as the individual becomes increasingly significant in comparison to the community in post-modern societies (Alvesson et al., 2008; Brown, 2015).

However, identity as a central part of consumption has received a lesser focus in marketing research than in organizational and management research more broadly, and is mainly represented in Consumer Culture Theory work. As such it is relevant to review to what extent identity has been discussed in Consumer Culture Theory research, and to what extent it draws from and differs from research of identity and identity work in organizational and management research.

2.1.1 Consumer Culture Theory

As part of a qualitative turn in marketing research, Arnould and Thompson (2005) argue that an increasingly coherent and unified stream of qualitative Consumer Culture Theory research challenges dominant streams of consumer research within marketing, primarily Behavioral Decision Theory (BDT) and Econometric modeling (Arnould & Thompson, 2007). They summarize a number of stream of research in consumer research under the title Consumer Culture Theory. This field of research is characterized by a common interest in how consumption in its many aspects forms and mediates a large part of the culture, identity, and habits of individuals. This is particularly relevant for individuals in a post-modern society characterized by a decrease in significance of traditional forms of social organizing and identification such as strict social classes or gender, and characterized more by constructed identity and their portrayal (Holt, 1998). Identity is viewed in Consumer Culture Theory as something that is constructed from a network of cultural meanings and practices mediated by consumption, and as such has a structuralist underpinning in understanding identity. Consumer Culture Theory distinguishes itself from more traditional consumer research specifically in taking a broader view of culture as not simply unitary and dominantly national. Additionally, Consumer Culture Theory-oriented research is generally qualitative and takes a subjectivity-centered approach to understanding consumption, in contrast to more common quantitative and positivist leanings of a large portion of consumer research (Arnould & Thompson, 2005).

Arnould and Thompson (2005) summarize Consumer Culture Theory into four streams that overlap and coexist: consumer identity projects, marketplace cultures, the sociohistoric patterning of consumption, and mass-mediated marketplace ideologies and consumers' interpretive strategies. Consumer identity projects are centered around the ways in which individuals use consumption in defining their identities and in identity construction.

The concept of marketplace cultures builds on the idea that individuals are increasingly choosing to be part of groups and sub-cultures that are formed around certain ways of consuming, for example biker culture infused with symbolism and meanings originating from corporate sources (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995).

The sociohistoric patterning of consumption stream deals with how for example class, gender, or other social and cultural scripts affect consumption. In the Consumer Culture Theory stream proposed by

Arnould and Thompson (2005), existing social and cultural structures may be seen not necessarily as dominant scripts that have to be adhered to, but nonetheless as affecting consumption choices. Finally, the idea of mass-mediated marketplace ideologies and consumers' interpretative strategies is that dominant social and cultural understandings are mediated through consumption practices. Consumer culture, consisting of all the various meanings and practices associated to forms of consumption, can be seen as marketplace ideologies that transmit and strengthen normative understandings.

These four streams of research within CCT research are a heuristic tool proposed by Arnould and Thompson (2005) in order to facilitate understanding of CCT-oriented research, but are not necessarily distinct streams of research as such. Rather, research in the CCT tradition tends to theoretically foreground one or two of the CCT streams, but may well address all streams tacitly within the scope of the research (Arnould & Thompson, 2007).

Identity and identification are investigated mainly in the research streams of consumer identity projects and mass-mediated marketplace ideologies. These two streams of research have similarities in their treatment of identity and identification, though generally consumer identity project oriented research tends to privilege the individual as an actor and identity worker, and the mass-mediated marketplace ideologies research stream tends to put more emphasis on structural forces affecting individuals' identification. Even though these two streams of CCT research tend towards prioritizing different perspectives on consumer agency, they draw from the same debate regarding agency/structure tensions within identity work. In engaging with this agency/structure tension, CCT research from these two streams have managed to move beyond entrenched perspectives of dominating structural forces and passive consumers on one side and enormously agentic consumers freely drawing from various cultural resources in their identity play (Arnould & Thompson, 2007). However, the discussion regarding identity work and individual agency is still largely confined to within the structure/agency debate. This is in contrast to more diverse perspectives in consumer agency, and more broadly individual agency, that is apparent in broader management and organizational research, for example research on various types of agency by Campbell (2009).

Even though Arsel and Thompsons (2011) article takes a broader view of identity in that it is perceived as more constructionist, the term identity work is not clearly defined or elaborated on. Arsel and Thompson make reference to both identity work and identity practices, and identify the

significance of investigating explicitly the identity work that is undertaken by individuals in contrast to treating identity as a given or something that is chosen from a socially available repertoire of identity images. However, in contrast to more sociological research on identity and identity work such as Alvesson et al. (2008) or Brown (2015; 2017), identity work is used as a metaphor for *whatever happens* when individuals construct their identities and narratives. Identity work is characterized more as how individuals' consume, who they socialize with, and what cultural knowledge they acquire while building cultural capital, rather than a clear set of actions or processes that from identity work.

Üstüner and Holt (2007) investigate identity projects where individuals strive for mythologized consumption modes, yet lack prerequisite cultural capital to credibly reach or even simulate such consumption practices. Üstüner and Holt view identity in many ways in structuralist terms as an identity image that is aspired to from a selection of socially and culturally available resources. However, they investigate the process of identification not simply in generic terms as *whatever happens* when individuals decide to pursue an identity image, but rather in a more nuanced manner as performed images of what an identity could be like for an individual. Individuals access culturally and socially available resources, but may themselves construct their own understanding of what an aspired identity is like through experimentally performing the aspired identity and sampling various aspects of a dominant or hegemonic cultural image.

Thompson (2004) discusses the role that mythological narratives have in marketplace ideologies, more specifically as marketplace mythologies. Thompson illustrates how common societal and cultural mythological ideas and narratives feature in consumption practices and understandings by being appropriated to specific consumption contexts through which they gain meaning for individuals. This is in contrast to mythological associations and narratives being directly used or identified to by individuals as portrayed in more structuralist understandings of mythology in society (Thompson, 2004). The meeting point between mythical ideas or narratives and ideological motivations that make use of and give meaning to myths is conceived as a locus of identity construction and identification.

Thompson (2004) argues for the importance of viewing the communication of marketplace ideologies and myths as more than interpretation of stimuli such as ads, and expanding views of individuals' use of marketplace ideology and myths to a broader perspective including discourse and narrative of consumers of a particular form of consumption. Thompson (2004) makes reference to Foucault's (1984) notions of discourses of power that structure and influence individuals processes of

identification and conception of identity. As various ideological perspectives are served by appropriating and modifying mythological meanings for a particular context of consumption, aspired versions of identity and consumption are created according to Thompson (2004). Portrayals of individuals engaging with marketplace myths and ideologies portray individuals as agentic, and have a markedly constructionist orientation privileging individuals abilities to construct their own socially-situated reality and identity.

While Thompson (2004) identifies a locus for identity work and finds that identity work takes place as individuals engage in a discourse surrounding a mode of consumption, more detailed investigation into what constitutes identity work and how exactly a discourse of power affects identity work is missing. Thompson (2004) also makes reference to the role of narratives in identification and pursuing aspired identities, but does not comment on the overall role of narrative in identification or how individuals identify aspired identities.

Consumer Culture Theory research questions the methodology of positivist marketing research, and allows for deeper and more explorative insights into consumers thinking and motivations. It also establishes individuals – all in some way consumers – as consuming market meanings that are mediated and distributed through mass-media. The entrepreneurs in this thesis can therefore be viewed as consumers in a consumption environment, just one of identity rather than any material product.

2.1.2 Identity in Consumer Culture Theory

Consumer Culture Theory-oriented research largely, though sometimes implicitly, embraces the notion of identity work as the main method of identification investigated in CCT research. The CCT-oriented research from the stream of *consumer identity projects* and the stream of *mass-mediated marketplace ideologies and consumers' interpretive strategies*, in engaging with questions of agency vs. structure in identification tend to address the specific question of what identity is somewhat implicitly. This is in contrast to research from the broader arena of management and organizational theory research where questions regarding the nature of identity are more explicitly addressed as by Brown (2015; 2017).

Consumer Culture Theory portrays individuals as consumers as in many ways agentic, in that individuals make use of a wide array of cultural meanings and practices "to further their identity and lifestyle goals" (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). The conceptualization of identity presented by Arnould and Thompson (2005) is strongly centered on a narrative sense of identity. While much Consumer Culture Theory research deals with identity, the focus on consumption often overshadows a more nuanced investigation on the complexity of identity and how identification occurs.

Belk (1988) states that possessions form a significant part of individuals' self-concept, and that through possessions we distinguish ourselves from others, build and develop our sense of identity, and maintain continuity in our identity. Belk (1988) builds a theory of an extended self in which individuals may incorporate various physical objects into their sense of self, and where individuals use objects to build and sustain identity. Objects can be seen to be part of oneself if they can be controlled, mastered, or known. Various possessions may allow individuals to imagine possible futures or to connect to one's past. Possessions through gift-giving may enable individuals to exert control on others, and others such as children may be a part of one's own identity. Belk, in explaining the multitude of ways in which an extended self can include possessions, one's own body, other people, and shared objects, portrays individuals as agentic in that they may through possession and association construct and maintain their sense of self.

Belk (1988) discusses the centrality of possessions and consumption in individuals' processes of constructing a sense of self, and illuminates the process of curation that individuals may go through in incorporating objects and others into their extended image of their selves. In an updated form of the concept of the extended self in the digital world, Belk (2013) expands on the ways in which the digitalization of possessions, for example, may create a sense of loss of possessions but also allow individuals to use and share their collections of possessions and other extended aspects of the self to others. The extended self may be harnessed digitally to create and display an image of the self to others, as well as gain recognition and social affirmation of one's self-image. Digitalization can be seen in Belk's (2013) article as an enabler of individuals' agency in their identification, allowing ever more complex assemblages of identity – possibly at the cost of coherency, or by establishing identity coherency as a state of mind to be pursued – as well as unprecedentedly effective communication of identity.

Bardhi et al. (2012) describe how contemporary global nomads – individuals who travel and live around the world for a significant portion of their lives – form liquid relationships to the objects and possessions that they have. In contrast to traditional views of identification in the vein of Belk (1988) that assume possessions form a significant part of an individual's identity, and that possessions serve to connect one to a particular place and time in the context of global mobility and change, Bardhi et al. (2012) find that this is not necessarily the case. Rather, some 'nomadic' individuals regard possessions in terms of use-value that is dependent on how they may help for example in adapting to a new circumstance or social situation. Such behavior is theorized to be indicative of a new group of post-modern nomads who live a highly flexible, ever-changing, and mobile lifestyle, which encourages a liquid attitude to possessions, but also a highly flexible and adaptive type of identification.

Scott et al. (2017) highlight how consumers purposefully seek out painful experiences in a process of connecting with their bodily self, creating a sense of a fulfilled life by injecting (of course entirely artificial) challenges and 'battle-scars' into often routinized lives, and in providing escape from self-awareness. Scott et al. portray participants of *Tough Mudder* obstacle races as agentic individuals seeking to develop their identity project through painful and routine-breaking experiences, adding a feat of achievement to their life story. The individual is portrayed as constructing a life narrative and making conscious decisions to break from routines, work, and structural forces that affect our lives. Structural forces are portrayed as something that individuals are aware of, such as routines or work, and that can therefore be escaped temporarily through extraordinary experiences.

Individuals are portrayed by Scott et al. (2017) as seeking to connect back to a more fundamental aspect of being, where an individual is not constrained by structural forces or social institutions such as work, family life, or modernity. In this pursuit, individuals seek various means of escape, ranging from river rafting to participating in the Burning Man festival. Pain is conceptualized as a means of intensifying a moment of escape and reconnecting with a pre-structural form of self, essentially through circumventing higher-order cognitive function and thinking. Scott et al. (2017) see this as an attempt by individuals to temporarily escape self-awareness and the burdens it brings with it. While structural forces are acknowledged by Scott et al. (2017) as influencing individuals, they are characterized as perceptible and escapable structures, which individuals can and do escape at will through consumption experiences. The relationship between agency and structure is seen distinctly in favor of the agency of the individual in being able to identify, choose between, and engage in societal structures.

Üstüner and Holt (2007) provided a more nuanced picture of individuals' attempts to construct and maintain identity through consumption practices. In investigating Turkish migrant women's acculturation to hegemonic, western-influenced cultural images, Üstüner and Holt illuminate how the poor migrant women negotiate conflicting cultural images from their parents' village contexts and dominant modernist images of city women. Üstüner and Holt (2007) show how the women experiment with and seek to embody the image of the city woman, but on account of their limited social, cultural, and financial capital struggle to achieve this. The women are shown to either abandon the pursuit of dominant consumption modes related to the image of the city woman, attempt to pursue this image through "ritual consumption practices", or end up with what Üstüner and Holt describe as shattered identity projects.

While Üstüner and Holt's (2007) investigation into acculturation provides a broader view of structural forces involved in identification, these forces that are described are historical sociocultural structures and class structures. The authors describe the problems that the migrant women have in negotiating an identity in their contexts, as well as the way that structural forces influence their identification, showing in contrast to Belk (1988; 2013) and Scott et al. (2017) less of a focus on individuals and consumers

In describing the Harley Davidson subculture and its associate biker culture, Schouten and McAlexander (1995) describe a process whereby individuals may seek membership of a particular subculture – for whatever reason – in an effort to manage one's identity. By seeking and gaining membership in a subculture, an individual may tap into an existing marketplace ideology in their identification. This allows an individual to claim or incorporate any sort of cultural or social aspects of a subculture into their identity project, but also subjects the individual to the evaluation of conformity necessary to pass as a member of a particular subculture. Schouten and McAlexander (1995) therefore provide an example of research in the Consumer Culture Theory field in which a balance between individual agency and structural forces is provided. While aspiring members of a subculture display agency in seeking to be a member of a particular subculture, they seek to gain agency within a broader societal context at the expense of conformity to a smaller subculture. The capacity for sub-culture membership to function as tool for identification for an individual, as well as for recognition of one's for example biker identity is affected by the ability to gain validation for this identity within a subculture.

Schouten and McAlexander's (1995) investigation into individuals' use of subcultural marketplace ideologies in their identification and conception of self provides an example of a tension between exhibiting agency by embracing an ideology and surrendering agency to a subculture-specific ideological structure. This perspective on individual and consumer agency portrays individuals as capable of agency through consumption choices and identifying to certain marketplace ideologies, but does not address the capacity – or lack of capacity – by individuals to reject or fight against structural forces influencing identification.

Thompson (2004) describes the way in which mythological meanings are used by both consumers and marketers to create cultural meaning. Thompson makes reference of previous, structuralist orientation research of mythological meanings in consumer research, and finds that these present an oversimplified portrayal of how cultural messages are transmitted from marketers to consumers. Rather than simply interpret an advertisement, consumers make use of a wide array of social and cultural sources such as common cultural narratives or discussions and discourse within a specific field to interpret mythological messages and make them meaningful. Thompson (2004) addresses more explicitly the tension that exists between individuals making use of available cultural and social meanings in understanding mythological meanings and marketplace ideologies, and the influence that the same structural forces such as common social and cultural meanings exert on individuals.

Thompson (2004) does assign individuals greater agency than is assigned by more structuralist accounts, finding that in the natural health marketplace individuals make use of several conflicting mythological messages to craft narratives and identities. These allow individuals to portray themselves for example as being against mechanistic medicine that is detached from holistic treatment of the body, as well as being rational, almost scientific in their application of natural health remedies. Even though Thompson does find evidence for consumer agency, reference is also made to Foucauldian discourses of power, and the way in which a discourse or normalized or legitimized way of talking and understanding something influences individuals. Thompson (2004) argues that individuals may make use of counter-cultural discourses to contest or challenge dominant discourses, and finds that rather than debating whether individuals may escape a discourse – in the case of Consumer Culture Theory, often consumerism – perhaps a more fruitful approach would be to consider hierarchies of discourses. While individuals may not be able to escape discourses of power entirely as humans are social animals,

many competing discourses exist between which individuals may choose and prioritize. This presents individuals with the ability to exert agency, while still being influenced and part of discourses of power and structural forces.

Arsel and Thompson (2011) undertake a study regarding the role of mass-mediated marketplace ideologies not simply as something to which individuals are attracted to and consequently may attempt to integrate into their self-conception, but as messages that may be threatening to identity investments made independently of the influence of a marketplace ideology. Arsel and Thompsons (2011) take on identity investment abandons more structuralist perspectives where individuals form identity investments by aligning themselves to a societally available meaning or practice, and rather investigates identity investments from a more constructionist perspective where the individual may build an identity image by adopting, playing, or experimenting with various socially available resources. They make a reference to this distinction by summarizing Consumer Culture Theory-oriented work that has been built on Bourdieu's (1984) views cultural capital being structured by class-specific consumption practices and Holt's (1998) elaboration of Bourdieu's theories to a post-modern consumption setting. Holt (1998) views consumption practices and individuals motivations to pursue them as being strongly affected by class-distinctions and attempts to maintain advantages in cultural capital.

Arsel and Thompson (2011) further discuss the possibility of individuals rejecting discourses, in their case the possibility of indie consumers rejecting notions of 'hipsterism' presented in marketplace myths. The individuals in question make use of demythologizing practices in order to distance themselves from an image of their consumption practices that they feel is threatening or disempowering. As such, Arsel and Thompson (2011) present a case of individuals rejecting a dominant discourse around a mode of consumption, without embracing or submitting to an explicit subcultural or counter-cultural discourse. Rather individuals make use of demythologizing techniques such as symbolic demarcation or diversifying the cultural and social basis of their identity to distance themselves from a discourse.

Research on identity and its formation through identity work in Consumer Culture Theory has received its fair share of attention, but focuses mainly on specific debates surrounding the nature of identity and the possibility of identity work. The most significant example of this is the varying understandings of structure vs. agency in identity and identification. However, organizational and

management research on identity generally displays a broader and more varied examination of identity and identification, as seen in the following section.

2.1.3 Identity in Management and Organizational Studies

While in sociology identity was understood more as an interface between society and an individual, in psychology identity has been viewed from a more subjective perspective of an individual's psychological needs (Brown, 2015). Increasing agreement on basic definitions of identity across various disciples has emerged, helping to bridge gaps between different understandings of identity:

> *"There is an emergent consensus that identity refers to the meanings that individuals attach reflexively to themselves, and developed and sustained through processes of social interaction as they seek to address the question 'who am I?'" (Brown, 2015)*

Alvesson et al. (2008) recognize that identity is approached from a number of different epistemological and ontological angles, and make use of Habermas' (1972) division of inquiry into three 'knowledge-constitutive interests': *technical, practical-hermeneutical, and emancipatory*. Approaching research on identity from this perspective, Alvesson et al. (2008) categorize identity research in terms of the ontological foundation of the research – positivist or constructionist – as well as the nature of knowledge that is produced.

Technical approaches to identity research are closest to mainstream business and management research regarding identity, and possesses a distinctly positivist ontological point of view.

Practical-hermeneutic research regarding identity takes a more constructionist perspective regarding identity, in that research in this tradition seeks to understand how individuals create meaning and identity in a social context. In the same vein, the main objective of research is to understand how identity is created, rather than creating practically useful tools for management or organizational fields. Within marketing and business research, Consumer Culture Theory in particular largely adheres to this 'knowledge constitutive interest' and its ontological and epistemological positions.

Emancipatory research regarding identity takes a more radical approach, though also espousing a constructionist ontological perspective. As the name suggests, emancipatory research seeks to question traditionally 'known' assumptions regarding identity, and takes an interest in understanding identity as a part of social power structures. An example given by Alvesson et al. (2008) is that of narratives

regarding career, which is also extendable to entrepreneurship. As workers are expected to make a career, they are expected to have initiative at work, strive for efficiency and results, and strive for promotions. To what extent this is simply a natural desire to improve one's position, and to what extent a discursive means of control by society to push individuals to entrepreneurship and efficiency remains open.

The position adopted in this thesis is closest to the *practical-hermeneutic* position, as the main aim is to understand entrepreneurs' identity work from a constructionist ontological perspective rather than a positivist one, while not aiming for an explicit understanding of underlying societal power structures. This is, again, in line with a mainstream of Consumer Culture Theory research adhering to a *practical-hermeneutic* position, though the positioning in Consumer Culture Theory literature is perhaps not as explicit as in Alvesson et al.'s. (2008) description of how identity is researched in broader management and organizational research.

Brown (2015) identifies five central debates surrounding the nature of identity that are relevant to consider and in which the concept of identity work can be central. These areas of debate summarize many of the aspects of identity that are problematic to define precisely, and therefore are understood in often contrasting ways.

Structure and agency: While various frameworks, discourses, and structures influence and bound identities, individuals on the other hand possess agency and may define their identity themselves. An important question then is to what extent society and others influence or dictate individuals' images of themselves and to what extent individuals are able to exert agency. Perspectives range from those founded in Foucault's (1972) work that emphasize how societal forces bound and limit – and ultimately perhaps dictate – what individuals identities are, to understandings of identity that privilege individuals' agency in constructing or even playing with different components of identity (Ibarra and Petriglieri, 2010). This debate regarding the nature of identity is perhaps the one that is most explicitly addressed in Consumer Culture Theory research, as it underlies several of the main strands of research: the sociohistoric patterning of consumption, as well as mass-mediated marketplace ideologies and consumers' interpretive strategies. Research in these strands by necessity deals with the individual's capacity for agency and various limiting factors.

Stability and fluidity: There has traditionally been some consensus, but not universal, that identity may be locked in a tension between a more stable core identity and an ongoing identity work process that can be evolutionary, and can include 'suppler working self-concepts'. Recently more radical new

perspectives argue that identity is continuously being constructed and formulated, and is extremely plastic if some stability is present.

Coherence and fragmentation: Identities have especially in the past been seen as generally coherent in terms of an "individuals' sense of their own continuity over time, clarity in awareness of the connections between multiple identities, a sense of completeness or wholeness, and [embracing] of the essentially integrated nature of [selves]", and the goal of identity work as creating coherence. However other strands of research point out that identities are seldom entirely coherent, contain paradoxes and inconsistencies, and that several contradictory identities may exist in tandem (Alvesson et al., 2008).

Positive and negative identities: There is debate over the extent to which individuals naturally seek to possess and create positive identities. While many studies find that even individuals with stigmatized identities seek to craft and present them in a positive light, more critical scholars argue that an individualistic society conditions individuals to seek positive identities, and that it is equally possible to be unable to create or seek a positive identity, potentially suffering a breakdown of identity. An example of Consumer Culture Theory research that explicitly foregrounds the potential for negative identities – much Consumer Culture Theory research explicitly or implicitly deals mostly with positive identities – is Üstüner and Holt's (2007) research on shattered identity projects.

Authenticity and identities: Some scholars argue that there is an authentic self as opposed to an outward or performed self, and that tensions between these two can result in stress. More post-structural scholars from for example discursive or dramaturgical orientations argue that authenticity is not meaningful, and that there is no authentic self, but rather a self-image that is constructed through discourse.

Overall, Consumer Culture Theory research deals with identity much more narrowly, often either explicitly or implicitly focusing on one aspect of identity, as opposed to a more holistic take on the complexity of identity and identification. Much could be potentially gained of Consumer Culture Theory researchers – while providing illuminating findings in their own right – would consider some of the other identity debates that Brown (2015) lists. For example Arsel and Thompson (2011) consider the nature of structure and agency as well as authenticity in consumers embracing 'alternative' consumption choices, but do not directly address the coherence or fragmentation that may emerge from maintaining multiple identity investments across mainstream and sub-cultures.

Watson (2009b) views identity to exist both as a public and core identity. Watson distinguishes between 'social-identity' and 'personal identity' and argues that personal identity is strongly affected

by and built on discursively available social-identities. Available social identities can be social-category such as nationality or ethnicity, formal-role such as profession, local-organizational that are based on individuals specific organizational circumstances, local-personal that are based on how individuals are perceived in local contexts, and cultural-stereotype identities based in cultural discourse. Through accessing, picking, and combining various aforementioned identity types from social discourse, Watson argues, individuals construct identities in various contexts. The concept of identity work is in a secondary role as a modifier of publicly available identities to fit individuals, rather than in a central role as commonly seen in practical-hermeneutical identity work. Watson (2009b), however, in placing identity work in a secondary role in identification does emphasize the capacity of identity work to be directed from the personal to the public and vice versa simultaneously. Identity work is affected by external discourses, but identity work is also conducted in the knowledge that others will also interpret an individuals' identity work. Watson's (2009b) foregrounding of the wider societal context in which identification takes place also foregrounds how Consumer Culture Theory research sometimes fails to consider identification in its broader cultural, national, or for example religious context. Studies in Consumer Culture Theory research may entirely dismiss the broader context in which identification takes place – this may be seen in some *identity projects* research – or even in cases where broader social or cultural discourses or class structures are considered, make limited mention of the enormous amount of historical, cultural, national, religious, and mythical resources and discourses that affect individuals.

Thornborrow and Brown (2009) seek to understand identity through desired or aspired selves. Viewing individuals to be in pursuit of various aspired identity images requires an understanding of the role of narrative in identification, and consequently viewing identity as at least somewhat coherent and stable. This view constructs identity as both a result of agency and structures, as individuals pursue version of themselves that are understood to be positive or valued in society. Similarly Down and Warren (2008) investigate how imagined or possible images of self can be employed in experimenting with identity. Both views of identity assume fundamentally that individuals fundamentally seek to construct a positive identity image. Thornborrow and Brown (2009) position their findings on aspirational identity within a broader framework of identity as a method of identification that functions within a discourse. By describing and dictating what an aspired identity is like and providing tools and guidance on how individuals may reach an aspired identity, such discourse regarding aspired identities

both enables and constrains identity and what individuals may construct their identity to be like while still remaining legitimate and authentic within a discourse.

Organizational and management research has examined identity and identification more broadly as evidenced by Brown (2015) and Alvesson et al. (2008), and in general involves a more psychology-oriented perspective on identity and identification that takes into account for example to what extent identity is social vs. personal and what the purpose of identification is. Comparatively, Consumer Culture Theory research on identity generally takes identity as coherent, stable, and positive with some exceptions such as Üstüner and Holt (2007) exploring the other side of debates Brown (2015) summarized.

2.2 Identity Work as the Lens for Examining Identification

The process of identity creation can be viewed through different perspectives, and are categorized by Alvesson et al. (2008) in line with Habermas' (1972) earlier mentioned 'knowledge-constitutive interests'. Corresponding ontological and epistemological perspectives towards the process of identity creation are Social Identification Theory as *technical*, Identity Work as *practical-hermeneutical*, and *emancipatory* points of view that emphasize societal power structures.

Identity Work is the stream of research, as well as most commonly used metaphor, corresponding to what Alvesson et al. (2008) identify as the *practical-hermeneutical* interest. Identity Work takes a more moderate position regarding the extent to which certain identities and discourses are imposed, allowing for a broader interpretation of individuals as agentic, proactive identity workers. Research on Identity Work includes a broad range of perspectives regarding the open questions concerning identity listed by Brown (2015). Identity work can for example be understood as either continuous, periodic, or subliminal if the stability or fluidity of identity is investigated.

Brown (2015) concludes that the most common and influential definition of the basic processes of Identity Work is Sveningson and Alvesson's (2003) definition of "identity work refers to people being engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness". While this definition makes certain assumptions regarding the coherence, positivity, and stability of identity, it is a useful conceptualization of Identity Work for the purposes of this study. While this definition lists aspects of Identity Work,

Brown (2015) finds that no consensus regarding generic processes that make up Identity Work exists. Rather, many forms of Identity Work are suggested and used in literature.

However, Brown (2017) summarizes five approaches to understanding what Identity Work can be understood to consist of: *Discursive*, *Dramaturgical*, *Symbolic*, *Socio-cognitive*, and *Psychodynamic*. While in practice often overlapping or even simultaneous, these approaches are often adopted as a lens through which to study Identity Work. A *Discursive* approach to understanding Identity Work is one that takes language and its use in context as a significant way of understanding individuals' processes of identification. Understanding an individual's use of language in the context of certain discourses allow researchers to evaluate to what extent individuals engage with, resist, or in general interact with perceptions of what they are and could be. Brown (2017) also references strong narrative tendencies in *discursive* understandings of Identity Work. Individuals are often seen to be in a continuous process of crafting a story of themselves, and alternatively integrating or separating certain parts from their identities. A *Discursive* perspective of Identity Work is strongly aligned with the methodology of this research, but other approaches to Identity Work are not excluded. *Dramaturgical* Identity Work seeks to understand identification through enacted practices, such as performing a role one identifies to or otherwise conforming to actions or practices expected of a role. *Symbolic* approaches to Identity Work seek to highlight physical objects or appearance as being used by individuals to identify to certain roles, norms, or cultures. For example academics may express their identification or resistance to this role by embracing or shunning certain dress-codes or ornamentations. *Socio-cognitive* approaches stress the role of cognitive processes such as comparisons to various social groups, and evaluation and trial of various 'trial' versions of identity. Finally, *Psychodynamic* perspectives build on the role of various psychological processes such as "fantasy, denial and rationalization" (Brown, 2017).

Snow and Andersson (1987) recognize that identity work may occur through displaying and owning physical objects that convey identity and can be used in identification, through managing one's personal appearance, through identifying and socializing with certain social groups and through identifying in a particular way verbally. These correspond in many ways to the approaches to identity work identified by Brown (2017), to symbolic, dramaturgical, socio-cognitive, and discursive respectively. Snow and Andersson (1987) note, however, that the necessity of physical objects and

appearance in the case of symbolic and dramaturgical identity work may render it difficult for some, particularly poorer individuals, to engage in effectively.

Brown and Toyoki (2013), in investigating prisoners' identity work in a highly controlled setting, found that despite prison life severely restricting their available space for identity work and imposing certain identities to them, prisoners had agency in identity and identification. Individuals can and do exercise agency in the most limiting physical, psychological, and symbolic conditions. Agency and power structures coexist, in some sense rendering a debate over the preeminence of one or the other unnecessary. While debates over degrees of influence are open, it is clear that even the most totalizing power structures do not inhibit identity work. Equally, the most unstructured context for identity work is unlikely to be devoid of limiting and enabling societal structures. Brown and Toyoki (2013) argue that institutional and organizational legitimacy can be constructed and deconstructed in conjunction with identity work. The authors link identity work as an integral part in organizational legitimacy, applicable to any organization that – in an emancipatory vein – impose forms of identity and discourse on individuals.

Alvesson and Willmott (2002) conceptualize identity as consisting of fundamentally a narrative that provides a degree of stability, continuity, and coherence. Upon this narrative, individuals work through engaging in discourses and contexts. This formulation of identity work then takes the position that the possibility of a somewhat stable and coherent identity may exist, in contrast to some more radical positions. Thornborrow and Brown (2009) also recognize narrative as a crucial element in identity work, and point to a generally coherent and stable conception of identity as an enabler of narrative identity work. They highlight narrative identity work in the context of individuals striving for aspired identities.

Watson (2009b) warns against excessively focusing on narrative as a central form of identity construction. A 'narrative turn' in social research – Identity Work inevitably included – risks assuming that all individuals construe themselves as continuously changing and developed stories. It is important to recognize that not everyone experiences identity through narrative means, rather individuals engage in narrative identity work to varying degrees. Watson (2009b) lifts as a more widely applicable observation in the context of narrative identification the fact that everyone is part of, participates in, and is affected by social and cultural narratives as fundamentally social beings. While a narrative focus

in identity work may exist in some individuals identity work, being sensitive to the role of narratives in identity work is more likely to be broadly relevant in research.

A balance in evaluating the effects of external influences on identity work and narratives is needed, according to Watson (2009b). Watson rejects the ability of individuals to be entirely agentic and unaffected by society, but equally the proposition that societal power structures prescribe identities to individuals. A distinction between internal and external aspects of identity is made, with the internal, according to Watson, being formed of a stable core identity. The external identity is formed from what individuals perceive in society through social interaction, culture, and media to be possible identities or variations of roles. Watson (2008; 2009b) stresses that while internal and external identities can be seen separately as private and public identities, in practice they coexist. On an individual level both internal and external identities are worked on simultaneously. This interpretation provides a compromise regarding the existence of an authentic, personal identity versus a public, performed identity versus the inseparability of public and core identities. Accepting this compromise requires, however, adopting more or less orthodox views on the possibility of a stable and coherent identity. Watson (2009b) stresses that all identity work is affected by the external. While this is clear in situations of social interaction where individuals may perform or display their identity, even internal, personal identity work is affected by how we imagine others would perceive our identity.

Watson (2009b) makes a distinction between discourses themselves being the method through which identity is worked on, and discourses being a method of accessing identity positions. Watson understands discourses to be means of accessing and tapping into various identity images available in public discourse. The available identity images are seen as the more central concept in identity work, rather than the process of engaging in a discourse and constructing meaning from it. Watson's position is one that in some ways privileges society's ability to impose identity images on individuals as well as limit and direct identity work. More constructionist perspectives such as Alvesson et al.'s (2008) practical-hermeneutical identity work place focus on a subjective understanding of individual's identity work where individual's agentic engagement in discourse is the central means of producing identity work. Watson (2009b) does acknowledge that individuals possess the ability to modify and adapt various identities available in social discourse, thus granting that individuals are capable of agency in engaging in discourse rather than merely accessing identities through discourse.

Beech et al. (2008) question the existence of a stable core identity, which in case of change can be modified to adapt or reinforced to reject new settings and discourses. They argue that in organizations, change can be seen as more of a constant than stability, and that in line with this a stable identity can be seen more as a target than a reality. The complex nature of identity work and difficulty in seeking to conform or embrace a certain stable identity is underlined by the constantly changing nature of organizational identity and discourses. Beech et al. (2008) recognize the significance of dramaturgical and symbolic embodiments of identity, in that individuals in organizations seek to understand their place in organizations and their cultures through for example embracing or resisting certain behaviors or clothes and items.

The notion from Brown and Toyoki's (2013) research on the existence of the opportunity of identity work in the most dominating structures, and the related notion that structural forces are likely to exert themselves even in the most open and flexible environments is crucial for this thesis. While entrepreneurship is often seen as an enabling and limitlessly open environment, there are structures that limit and enable the identity work of aspiring entrepreneurs. Out of Brown's (2017) various methods of identity work the *discursive* method of identity work is most relevant to this research – though by no means the only applicable one – in that it directly relates to notions that the nature of agency may be seen as intrinsically discursive (Hitlin and Elder, 2007).

Consumer Culture Theory research regarding identity and identification is comparatively less rigorous in foregrounding identity work, and rather tends to address identification and identity work more vaguely in the context of examining a form of consumption. Additionally, identity is generally taken as coherent, stable, and positive. While the structure/agency debate is arguably the best explored within Consumer Culture Theory research, it is useful to draw from organization and management research regarding the nature of agency and discourse. Notably the more detailed work on discourse as both enabling and limiting – as well as potentially self-disciplining within organizations or ecosystems – is used in exploring the nature of agency within an entrepreneurial discourse that is superficially extremely agentic.

The agency/structure duality emerges as the most defining aspect of entrepreneurs' identification, as entrepreneurs deal with agentic discourse and structural constraints. In this context different mechanisms emerge regarding the way that entrepreneurs seek to navigate discourse that encourages agency while glossing over enormous structural constraints. Entrepreneurs may either fully

commit to the agentic narrative and work against structural constraints, or alternatively seek to view the structural forces that affect their entrepreneurial efforts in a more positive light in order to establish agency and emphasizing self-fulfillment.

2.2.1 Modalities of Existence and Life Stories

McAdams work on agency and communion (McAdams et al. 1996) provides an excellent perspective for examining entrepreneurs' identity work and attempts to establish agency as it deals with fundamental ways of viewing the world and individuals role in it. This reflects entrepreneurs' different strategies in establishing their places within entrepreneurial discourse and the entrepreneurial ecosystem.

McAdams (2001) views identities as being constructed by modern individuals as a way to create continuity and coherence in their narrative construction of their life stories. McAdams (2001) summarizes changes in the field of psychology, noting that a strengthening focus on viewing an individuals' identity and identification through an entire life story portrays individuals' identification as a narrative "complete with setting, scenes, character, plot, and theme." (McAdams, 2001) These life stories are sub-consciously and continuously modified and developed, and created or coauthored in a particular cultural and social context. McAdams suggests that individuals start to develop imagoes or aspired versions of themselves in early adulthood, protagonists in their possible and developing self-narratives. In fact, a tendency to start to formulate one's life story in this manner around early adulthood may be a reason why mythical narratives such as coming-of-age stories are such common narrative structures. McAdams (2001) proposes that identities are formed of different levels. Traits that are stable across situations, different ways of reacting to situations or characteristic adaptations, and finally the way in which individuals formulate their life story: "some people construct life stories that are modelled on classical tragedy, whereas others convey their identity as television sitcoms." (McAdams, 2001).

The viewpoint adopted by large in McAdams (2001) and McAdams et al.'s (1996) work regarding identity and identification is one that views identity as essentially coherent, positive, and agentic in reference to Brown's (2015) summary of debates regarding the nature of identity. This is

hardly surprising when considering life-stories or individuals' identification over their entire life, but is in contrast to research that foregrounds more temporally specific identity work exhibiting fragmented identities or negative and dominated identity work. This research concerns a specific period of entrepreneurs' lives, as well as a specific part of their lives, namely entrepreneurship. As such, parts of McAdams (2001) work on life-stories is not specifically relevant to this research, though it remains useful as theoretical founding.

McAdams (2001) summarizes thought on identity and identification in the post-modern era by finding that narratives of identities are structured in ways that are intelligible in a particular cultural and social context. As such, modern formulations of identity and personal stories are expected to mirror and follow common contemporary structures and ideas such as modernism, a desire to rationalize, progress, create, etc. McAdams (2001) suggests that individuals in contemporary society are faced by pressures to make their identity and identification intelligible in their cultural context by conforming to ideas of what identity is supposed to be, look like, and be presented. Individuals are encouraged to craft and work on complex and multilayered identities, and are expected to be agentic and in relentless change. There is a plethora of cultural resources available on what one should be and how one should improve oneself, particularly in relation to entrepreneurship in individuals' identification.

McAdams work on identification is particularly useful for this study in the application of the themes of *agency* and *communion* to identity. McAdams et al. (1996) summarize – based on David Bakan's work – how *agency* and *communion* may be seen as two fundamental states of being and living. *Agency* represents the individual by itself, exerting influence on the world, whereas *communion* represents the individual as part of a group and through this becoming part of a greater whole. McAdams et al. (1996) make use of these themes in coding individuals' recollections of their life stories, purporting that the themes of *agency* and *communion* may be applied to identity and identification as fundamental ways of classifying and understanding how individuals identify. In other words, because these themes are such fundamental ways of existing – by oneself or as part of a community – they may be used to understand how individuals view themselves and their identity. As evidenced by this thesis, *agency* and *communion* as fundamental themes are applicable in a broad spectrum of situations and environments as ways of understanding and categorizing identification and identity work.

2.3 The Nature of Discursive Frameworks within Entrepreneurship

The nature of discursive frameworks is foregrounded especially by identity work studies from organization and management research. The understanding that identity work is based on available social resources and discourses, and thus also constrained by what these resources and discourses contain is significant in gaining deeper insight into identification.

Alvesson and Willmott (2002) note that management often aims to manage the insides of employees by instilling in them certain discourses regarding how they should perceive themselves as employees. These commonly include for example attempting to instill entrepreneurship into employees' images of what they should be like in organizations (Watson, 2008). Alvesson and Willmott (2002) take a decidedly emancipatory perspective on identity work in organizations, and foreground the power structures that are often purposefully created in order to control and prompt organizational members' identity work. Alvesson and Willmott (2002) note, however, that it is clear that organizations are not omnipotent and cannot dictate identities to organizational members, nor are they guaranteed to exert significant influence on organizational members' identity work. Nevertheless, power structures directing identity work exist within organizations, and can be effective in creating commitment and loyalty in employees unless perceived as illegitimate.

The increasing interest and relevancy of managerial influence on employees' identity work is based in many parts in the increasingly flexible, unstructured, and uncertain workplace that employees today have to contend with, creating the need for personal and non-bureaucratic attachment to organizations. This is linked by Alvesson and Willmott (2002) with difficulties in securing a stable identity on contemporary professional life.

Alvesson and Willmott (2002) explicitly identify means through which 'identity regulation' can be attempted in organizations: *Defining the person directly, Defining a person by defining others, Providing a specific vocabulary of motives, Explicating morals and values. Knowledge and skills, Group categorization and affiliation, Establishing and clarifying a distinct set of rules of the game, and Defining the context.*

These means of identity regulation may help understanding of the complex ways in which discursive frameworks affect individuals, as well as highlight potential power structures that affect and influence the discursive frameworks themselves. Alvesson and Willmott (2002) note the existence of different patterns of identity regulation through discursive frameworks. *Managerial* patterns of identity

regulation cast organizational members, particularly managers, as bearers or embodiments of organizational discourse and consequently its effect on employees identity work. While this pattern aligns most closely to managerial thought, Alvesson and Willmott (2002) also identify *cultural-communitarian* patterns of identity regulation as being founded in norms, practices, and broader societal contexts of various workplaces or settings. Alvesson and Willmott (2002) also raise the possibility of *quasi-autonomous* identity regulation which enables individuals to engage in identity work while recognizing and managing various frameworks of discourse. With respect to the entrepreneurial setting of informants in this thesis, the existence of *quasi-autonomous* identity regulation is highly relevant, as it raises questions over to what extent individuals may be agentic in engaging with discourse while still be subject to it. On the other hand *cultural-communitarian* identity regulation can most certainly be observed in the entrepreneurial ecosystem, as in many other communities.

Thornborrow and Brown (2009) position identity work within discursive frameworks as both agentic and constrained, compromising between more radical positions regarding identity work as either predominantly dictated by discourse and power structures, or as highly agentic and flexible. Discursive frameworks are conceptualized as structures that both enable and limit individuals' scope of identity work. Drawing on Foucauldian thought, discursive frameworks are frameworks of power that function through exerting discipline on individuals through various practices such as self-monitoring of compliance to discourse or comparisons to idealized images. As such, a discursive framework is not only a mechanism of control, but also a creator of meaning for individuals. They both limit what individuals may seek to be while still pursuing an aspired identity within a framework, but also provide resources that an individual can employ to pursue a particular identity. Thornborrow and Brown (2009) find that individuals, in seeking an aspired identity, may subject themselves to the control and power of a discursive framework. This, and the related acceptances of various mechanisms of control, represents both the power of discourse to control and influence identity work, as well as the ability of individuals to seek to construct a particular identity. However, achieving an identity, and this identity being recognized socially, requires the acceptance of social control. This control or system of power which dictates how to and who achieve certain identities can, referencing to Alvesson and Willmott (2002) be managerial or consciously imposed or cultural-communitarian or a more organic type of framework. Evaluating to what extent a framework is either purposefully created or more organically emergent may

be difficult, as well as investigating to what extent such frameworks of discourse are interpreted differently by individuals.

Coupland and Brown (2015) understand discursive frameworks that enable and control identity work by providing cultural and social resources for identity work as potentially more enabling over restricting than more emancipatory viewpoints do. While discursive frameworks *both* enable and constrain identity work, they are in many ways necessary to identity work as identity is worked on in social contexts (Coupland & Brown, 2015), and constantly affected by real or imagined social perceptions of identity and identity work (Watson, 2009b). Engaging in identity work within a discursive framework and subject to disciplinary power that assigns authenticity to achieved or aspired identity, Coupland and Brown (2015) find, can be perceived as intrinsically agentic. Individuals choose to engage in certain discourses, especially those that profess aspired identities to be elite, in order to work on their identities. Individuals can thus be seen to selectively choose which (or some) discourses that they wish to make part of their identity work. This casts various 'surveillance' mechanisms that may be seen in a negative light as creating self-doubt about the authenticity of certain identities (Thornborrow & Brown, 2009) in a considerably more positive light as enablers of identity work and identity that can be "measured, verbalized, judged and 'improved'" (Coupland & Brown, 2015). However, the extent to which identity work, whether enabled or imposed by discourses, was agentic or not remains unclear, as individuals do have to accept measurement, comparison, and 'surveillance' of conformity and authenticity of their identity work to values provided by the discourse.

Similar perspectives, though less explicit, can be seen in CCT-oriented research as well, for example as discussed by Thompson (2004) in consumers navigation of medical and holistic medicine discourse in attempts to counter imposed medical narratives regarding their various ailments. In this research Thompson (2004) investigates how consumers manage the tension between their own desire for agency and structural forces from a dominant scientific medical discourse as well as a counter-discourse of holistic medicine (Arnould & Thompson, 2007).

Kornberger and Brown (2007) also recognize that managers in organizations – and more broadly, organizational elites – may attempt to exercise control over discourses in an attempt to 'manage the insides' of employees or organizational members, the capacity for identity work and subjectivity provided by discursive frameworks make it unlikely that attempts at control are consistently or predictably efficient. Organizational members, or in a broader sense participants of

discourses, have tools and agency to subvert obvious attempts at managing identity work by for example organizational elites. Kornberger and Brown's (2007) interpretation is in line with the possibility for micro-emancipation through quasi-autonomous patterns of identity regulation proposed by Alvesson and Willmott (2002). This is not to say that individuals may escape the influence of discursive frameworks, rather simply that discursive frameworks may not be particularly effective for managing or 'colonizing' individuals identity work.

Kornberger and Brown (2007) find that disciplinary power inherent in discursive frameworks can be applied primarily through discursive means, that is in how individuals talk about values and aspirations central to a discourse. This portrays individuals participating in a discourse as agentic and participating in creating and modifying the discursive framework that they also rely on for authenticating identity and identity work. Organizational members or participants of discourses may themselves acknowledge they are part of discourses, but still feel that they are so willingly and knowingly, and thus exert control and influence on a particular discourse (Kornberger & Brown, 2007). Whether this is true or a sign of total subjugation to identity regulation is dependent largely on the philosophical position one wishes to take. Kornberger and Brown (2007) also highlighted the role of myths in creating aspired identities or states, and found that myths may be used, even if not particularly founded in reality, to achieve legitimacy for discourses.

Viewing entrepreneurship as a discourse that contains certain values and meanings is significant in understanding the motivations and mechanisms of entrepreneurs' identification. Particularly the notion that discourses can be self-disciplining is significant, as it reflects the way that entrepreneurs need to engage and conform to entrepreneurial ideals in order to reap the benefits of an entrepreneurial identity. This subjugation to discourse – though a very agentic discourse – is in contrast to the emphasis on agency that is so central to entrepreneurial thinking.

2.4 The Nature of Agency within Discourse

The central role of notions of agency in entrepreneurial discourse, as well as the centrality of the agency/structure debate in research on discourse both warrant a closer look on what exactly constitutes agency.

Within Consumer Culture Theory, as well as to some extent broader management and organizational research, agency is investigated as a juxtaposition of agency and structure as opposites between which individuals exist. Depending on methodological and theoretical perspectives, individuals may be seen as highly agentic or highly dominated, though CCT and other management research has managed to illuminate more sophisticated strategies used by individuals and consumers in navigating tensions between capacity for agency and structure (Arnould & Thompson, 2007). For example Thompson et al. (2018) describe how consumers may diverge from exercising agency (or reflexivity) either in order to maintain their chosen lifestyle and identity or exercising agency when diverging from structurally and socially determined identities. Thompson et al. (2018) maintain that consumers may also reject opportunities for agency in working on a new identity as well as agency in the form of escaping a past identity role, but Thompson et al. (2018) still fundamentally interpret a change in identification as agentic.

Within research more concerned with the fundamental nature of agency, there are varying perspectives on whether for example agency is innate to individuals or whether genuine agency is in fact possible at all. Moreover, different ways of having agency in the context of discourse and structural forces exist.

Arnould (2007) summarizes how the nature of agency has been misunderstood or misrepresented in research on consumption, arguing that claims for consumer agency are already biased by an assumption of innate agency in market structures and Western culture. Additionally, Arnould (2007) points out that there is no clear way to differentiate agency from non-agency. In other words, an action that was the result of consumer agency is indistinguishable to an action that was predetermined by structural forces.

In a similar vein Loyal and Barnes (2001) argue that there is no meaningful difference in the logic behind voluntarism that stresses individual agency and structuration that stresses structural forces. Voluntarism relies on the assumption that individuals choose to take into account social norms etc. in choosing the most rational or egoistic action. Structuration does not take into account the possibility that an individual or actor may not be seeking to maintain ontological security and the status quo of structure. There is ultimately no certain way to know whether an action was chosen or dictated, but one may attempt to measure the persuasion or force needed to sway an action or choice.

Meyer and Jepperson (2000) find that the concept of what being an actor consists of is affected by a devolution of actorhood from the divine to the church, state, and ultimately individuals and organizations. Western models of legitimacy and actorhood are influenced by the devolution of actorhood from a monotheistic, omnipotent, and omniscient god to social actors. As rationality and science become legitimizing forces, more causes and entities gain interests. While these may be seen as having valid interests, this does not equate to actorhood. Rationalization of nature establishes who and what are legitimate interests, and rationalization of spiritual powers endows these with actorhood, creating the modern actor.

Modern actors can act in the interest of themselves, others, non-actors, or principles. Particularly actorhood for principles (such as furthering science) is dependent on the value placed on this through the rationalization of nature (there would be no value in understanding nature if it was not conceived as rational). As legitimate actorhood and the beneficiaries of it are established on a cultural basis, Western historical and spiritual bases influence modern concepts of actorhood.

Properties of modern agents are: (1) There is a tension between acting in raw agentic fashion (immediate self-interest) and in a broadly legitimated agentic fashion (broader movement towards legitimated goals, long run goals). (2) Agency is more and more standardized, as there is broader agreement on what and how actors should pursue. (3) Standardization of agency helps explain structural decoupling, actors of all level (states, organizations, and individuals) espouse and pursue high and elevated goals, yet often suffer from a lack of resource to do so (some more than others). (4) Ongoing rationalization and expansion of social agency increases the structuration of agency.

Reflecting on Loyal and Barnes (2001) arguments over the pointlessness and redundancy of arguing over agency and structure in terms of extreme agency or structuration determining action, Hitlin and Elder (2007) propose that agency might be better understood if considered in different temporal contexts. They propose that four types of agency may be used as an analytical tool for understanding how temporality affects individuals' capacity for agency: existential agency, pragmatic agency, identity agency, and life course agency. Agency may be treated as being different in different contexts, among them temporal ones. Existential agency deals with the fundamental capacity for agency across temporal orientations, pragmatic agency deals with the ability to exercise agency when faced with a new problem, identity agency deals with the capacity for agency within routine or normal

social interaction, and life course agency deals with the ability to exercise agency over an extended temporal horizon.

By accounting for temporal context, complexity regarding the fundamental nature of agency and the intractable problem of agency vs. structure may be lessened. Hitlin and Elder's (2007) temporal take on agency may be used to move discussion regarding agency beyond the agency/structure debate, and allows for consideration of other factors affecting agency rather than simply the dualistic conception of agency/structure.

Hitlin and Elder (2007) note the role of self-efficacy or the belief that individuals have in their agentic capacity in both their discussion of existential and life course agency. They summarize that the belief in one's agency can according to some theorization form the basis for a fundamental capacity for agency. In other words, because individuals believe in their fundamental capacity for agency, they are afforded agency. On the level of life course agency, self-efficacy is seen by Hitlin and Elder (2007) as a potential creator of agency, as a belief in being able to exercise agency to follow a potential life course necessarily affects the ability of an individual to exercise agency to follow this life course.

Campbell (2009) distinguishes between different natures of agency, finding that agency can be seen as either power of agency or agentic power. Power of agency refers in Campbell's logic simply to the ability by individuals to take action, or the capacity to choose an action. The term agentic power is related to the ability of an individual to exert change and agency on and against social structures. This division of agency reflects Campbell's (2009) finding that agency is generally defined either as the capacity to act, corresponding to the power of agency, or as the capacity to act in resistance to structure, corresponding to agentic power. The distinction between the power of agency and agentic power can be seen as whether individuals simply have the capacity to choose an action – which they on some level often do – or whether an individual can choose an action independently or even in opposition to structural forces.

While it is possible that an individual is not able to exercise agentic power, or the ability to exert agency over the world and over structures, it is still conceivable that an individual may be agentic in the sense of Campbell's (2009) power of agency. An individual may possess agency to choose an action over another even though they are heavily influenced or even predetermined on a more macro level to choose one particular action. In other words, it is possible to have and experience agency even

in the context of structure, and even with the assumption that structures and discourses ultimately determine and guide how we choose to act and how we choose to identify ourselves.

Campbell (2009) makes reference of claims that there is a bias in Western society for excessive agency, exemplified in for example the modern entrepreneur. While the entrepreneur may be held up as the personification of agency, given that the entrepreneur is seen as fundamentally changing or even destroying society in a process of renewal, it is relevant to consider whether the entrepreneur is portrayed as possessing power of agency or agentic power. An entrepreneur can fairly legitimately, according to Campbell (2009) be claimed to possess power of agency without succumbing to heroic portrayals of entrepreneurship. Whether the entrepreneur possesses agentic power is another question, and one that is possibly affected by Western ideological bias.

Particularly relevant in an entrepreneurial context is Hitlin and Elder's (2007) assertion that agency can be created through the belief in one's agentic capacity. This notion is useful in investigating entrepreneurs' agency in an environment that certainly places structural pressures on entrepreneurs, as attempting to distinguish a particular point between an entrepreneur's agentic capability and the structures that make up the entrepreneurial ecosystem might otherwise be highly unfruitful. Additionally Campbell (2009) raises relevant points regarding a social and mythological bias that affects discourse around entrepreneurship, and how this is in stark contrast to the reality of an entrepreneur's power of agency towards this discourse.

2.5 Entrepreneurship in Society

Entrepreneurship has been a part of human society since the beginning of written history, and as such comes loaded with numerous historical, mythological, and religious meanings. These will be investigated and positioned in the context of contemporary images of entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial research in order to examine the resources and discourse from which entrepreneurs in the Aalto entrepreneurial ecosystem indirectly draw. Research regarding the identity work of entrepreneurs specifically, and the particularities associated with it, will also be discussed.

2.5.1 Entrepreneurial Myths and Clichés

Bird (1992) presents – through a comparison to historical Roman and Greek mythology – traits and models that are today associated with entrepreneurship. The entrepreneur is cast as an agent of organizational creation, a figure that uses or appropriates resources in the process of creating something new, for example a product, service, or method of doing things. Listed as traits that enable an entrepreneur to be an agent of change and creation are: (1) *Appetite* as an intrinsic desire to create and do, a (2) *Vision* of the possible or the ability to see what could be above what is, (3) *Changing direction* or the ability to be flexible and adapt, (4) *Fast action* enabling entrepreneurs to seize opportunities, and (5) *Networking* or the tendency to both have broad access to resources and information and be able to leverage one's knowledge of these networks into innovation. Bird additionally frames the entrepreneur as a force of creative destruction, or at least an agent that thrives and directs economic chaos, or instances in which structures of ownership and patterns and processes of production are changing. Bird (1992) also highlights the dual nature of entrepreneurship, both as a radical, destroyer of old, and profiteer, and as leader, creator of new, and creator of new wealth or value. Entrepreneurs are often portrayed as economic heroes that keep the economy vital, create jobs, and improve living standards, but sometimes also as cultural heroes, in the sense that they wield a considerable cultural influence and are cultural leaders and trendsetters.

The portrayal of entrepreneurs as heroes is also mentioned by McMullen (2017), relating specifically to the prevalence of superhero movies today (including interestingly several entrepreneur superheroes such as Iron Man or Batman). McMullen draws attention to a discussion regarding the nature of the archetypal entrepreneur: a lone wolf operating on the edges of society, changing the surrounding nature through force of will, or a leader of a community, harnessing the power of the surrounding world to create change. McMullen (2017) argues that a prototypical hero's journey has affected entrepreneurship throughout the existence of entrepreneurship as an academic pursuit, and draws a connection to Schumpeter's early work regarding entrepreneurs. McMullen illustrates how portrayals of entrepreneurs and entrepreneurship by Schumpeter fit into the mold of the hero's journey, the universal, recurring, and timeless story of a hero overcoming obstacles and sacrificing to complete a journey. Heroic portrayals of entrepreneurship are situated into a historical context as part of a monomyth: a universal, ageless portrayal of heroism, an individual's triumph against external forces, and of breaking new ground.

Sørensen (2008) goes even further in linking discourse of entrepreneurship, in this case of a government report, to historical and religious roots. The entrepreneur is portrayed as a savior from the disruptive and complex forces of the future such as globalization, fragmentation, and changing roles between culture and economy. More specifically entrepreneurs fulfill their roles as saviors through the creation of something new. Sørensen (2008) argues that there are clear connections to religious imagery in portrayals of entrepreneurship, going back to arguably before the rise of large monotheistic religions. There is a wealth of historical, religious, and mythical associations to entrepreneurship that underlie how entrepreneurship is viewed, forming a number of prototypical images of entrepreneurship that exert considerable influence in contemporary society. These images align remarkably closely to for example McAdam's (2001) work on *agency* and *communion* as universal notions or states of being. Similarly entrepreneurship can be prototypically seen as either the triumph of an individual over circumstances and obstacles or as the product of collaboration and the coming-together of passionate and creative minds.

2.5.2 Entrepreneurship and Ideological Bias

Ogbor (2000) argues that the myths and clichés so deeply rooted in entrepreneurial research and discursive systems are inherently restrictive. Ogbor critiques the majority of entrepreneurial research because it presents prevalent perceptions as inherently neutral, deeply founded ideas. Ogbor adopts a post-modern, constructionist approach to exploring research conducted in the field of entrepreneurship, and argues that presenting the way things have always been done or perceived as the starting point for further discussion or research as narrow. Viewing scientific knowledge as always being contextual to prevailing beliefs, sociocultural, and socioeconomic conditions allows for the exposure of inherent biases in research.

Dominant discourse in entrepreneurship research has been in the past male oriented, emphasized masculine traits, and supernatural abilities. Ogbor (2000) summarizes how the underlying assumptions of entrepreneurial research have limited the role of women in perceptions and research of entrepreneurs despite feminist critiques of the dominance of a male orientation in entrepreneurship. Additionally, a large number of ethnic groups have been left outside mainstream views of entrepreneurship. According to Ogbor (2000) this is due to the presence of ideology in research, in the form of beliefs, values, and ideals that researchers hold. The research problems, and the basis and validity for research is founded

in the sociocultural, socioeconomic, and moral conditions in which research is taking place. As such, essentially any humanist research, or social science, can be seen as implicitly reinforcing the current dominant ideology.

Ogbor (2000) traces the ideology that permeates – or even contaminates – entrepreneurship research to the historical origins of the ideology that underlies much of the research done on entrepreneurship, starting again with Schumpeter's descriptions of entrepreneurs as being more or less heroic figures and possessing supernatural abilities and traits that are masculine. As mentioned by Bird (1992), McMullen (2017), and Sørensen (2008), much of the ideological basis of entrepreneurial research and entrepreneurial myths and clichés even today can be traced to ancient Hellenic or Roman roots and mythology and the mythology of Christianity and Abrahamic Religions. Ogbor (2000) finds further sources of the ideology permeating entrepreneurial research in the American history of dominance over nature through settling America and expanding the United States westwards to the Pacific Ocean. In this tradition, the settling and domination is portrayed as a masculine activity, and inherently entrepreneurial, whereas the nature or natural state is portrayed in more feminine terms. As such, in the American tradition, entrepreneurship as affected by the history of the settling of America and the Westward expansion is distinctly masculine.

Rehn et al. (2013) find that entrepreneurship has developed and matured considerably as a field of research from its origins as a mix of several other academic disciplines, but that as the academic field of entrepreneurship has matured, a number of assumptions have come to be broadly accepted in entrepreneurship research. Rehn et al. (2013) argue that there is an increasing amount of dogma in entrepreneurship research, as well as myths that permeate research, and in this are aligned with Ogbor's views that entrepreneurship research is based on certain ideological assumptions.

Nicholson and Anderson (2005) employ the theory of structuration in exploring entrepreneurial myths and clichés in a British newspaper in two instances, 1989 and 2000. They seek to understand the way in which agents and structures interact to create a social system, in this case how agents and structure create the entrepreneurial culture of the contemporary world and the understandings related to it. In their analysis, the agents are represented by journalists gathering, processing and spreading cultural information about entrepreneurship, and the structure is the broader enterprise culture. Nicholson and Anderson (2005) found there were clear archetypes of entrepreneurs portrayed in media such as "dynamic wolfish charmers, supernatural gurus, successful skyrockets or community saviours

and corrupters." Nicholson and Anderson (2005) describe how the myths and clichés regarding entrepreneurs are socially constructed through a process involving the 'production and reproduction' of culture and a system where agents and structures affect each other in the process of creating and disseminating cultural meanings.

The historical and religious underpinnings of entrepreneurship are still very much present in contemporary mainstream images of entrepreneurial prototypes. Ogbor's (2000) and Rehn et al.'s (2013) findings on the 'contaminated' or biased image of entrepreneurship as for example Darwinian, communitarian, or missionary (Fauchart and Gruber, 2011) are still relevant and affect the way that society and more specifically individuals in an entrepreneurial setting see themselves. Entrepreneurs exposed to these 'contaminated' or biased images of entrepreneurship will necessarily use these images as resources in their identity work.

2.5.3 Entrepreneurship and Identification

Reflecting on a lack of research in entrepreneurship regarding entrepreneurial identity from a subjective position, Fauchart and Gruber (2011) investigate entrepreneurial identity from a Social Identification Theory perspective. They assert that investigating entrepreneurial identity not just as conforming to a number of prototypical entrepreneurial images, but rather investigating entrepreneurial identity as a socially situated process where entrepreneurs identify with various social groups will yield new viewpoints on the role that founders of companies play in imprinting their identity on their companies. Fauchart and Gruber's (2011) work is distinctly of a *technical* orientation in reference to Alvesson et al.'s (2008) description of different perspectives on identity. The lack of *practical-hermeneutical* identity work-oriented study on entrepreneurial identification is highlighted by the fact that Fauchart and Gruber (2011) argue that a Social Identification Theory perspective is a fresh look on entrepreneurial identity.

Fauchart and Gruber (2011) found that using a Social Identification Theory lens, three distinct 'pure' founder identities emerged: Darwinian, communitarian, and missionary. Darwinian founder identities, and the imprint that this identity leaves on a company conforms to traditional market-based motivations and methods of entrepreneurship. Such identities are profit and growth oriented, and emphasize efficiency and market orientation. Communitarian and missionary identities take a less market-oriented

approach to entrepreneurship. Communitarian identities emphasize serving specific, similar-minded customer segments with often novel and innovative ideas. Missionary identities in particular deviate from traditional market-orientation in that these identities are motivated by political and social factors and emphasize social impact over profit or growth. Fauchart and Gruber (2011) conceptualize the importance of their findings – exploring varying non-market oriented entrepreneurial identities – in terms of extending critical analysis of entrepreneurship as focusing largely on market-based entrepreneurship to research on entrepreneurial identity. They assert that entrepreneurial identity has been affected by the same norms, or dogma in Ogbor's (2000) words, that portray entrepreneurship in terms of formal-market entrepreneurship originating in Schumpeter's conceptualization of entrepreneurial motives as primarily self-serving.

Down and Warren (2008) take a theoretically less structuralist perspective on entrepreneurial identity, and see entrepreneurial identity as being constructed as a narrative of self. They view entrepreneurial identity as being constructed through discourse surrounding entrepreneurial myths and stereotypes as pointed out by Ogbor (2000) and Nicholson and Anderson (2005). This positions Down and Warren much more closely in relation to the *practical-hermeneutical* orientation identified by Alvesson et al. (2008). Down and Warren (2008) also address the issue of agency and structure, arguing against perspectives that see entrepreneurial identification, along with all other forms of identification, as being strongly influenced and determined by hegemonic social understandings and discourses. Rather they understand entrepreneurs to be agentic in constructing and working on their identities as entrepreneurs. Down and Warren (2008) find that the process of entrepreneurial identification, or becoming an entrepreneur, can be seen as a process of claiming authenticity and legitimacy as an entrepreneur and for one's entrepreneurial identity. They identify the significant role of entrepreneurial clichés in allowing individuals to experiment with constructing an entrepreneurial identity.

Down and Warren (2008) elaborate on the relevancy of clichés in identity and identification by pointing out that an approachable and simplified representation of a discourse allows various inconsistencies in identification to be glossed over, for example the potentially vast differences in an aspiring entrepreneurs identity and those traits assigned to entrepreneurs in discourse. Similarly clichés may be a method of managerial control and a part of power structures in discourse by reducing or smoothing over inconsistencies in managerially controlled organizational discourse.

Down and Warren's (2008) take on clichés and weak attachment to – in this case – entrepreneurship further illustrates the capacity of individuals for agency in identification, despite the existence of potentially dominating discourses regarding identity. By forming only weak attachment to an identity and the discourse associated with it, individuals display agency in their potential to dispose of certain aspects of their identity and the meanings and understandings related to it in discourse. The potential for individuals to drop their entrepreneurial identity, or portions of it, illustrate that individuals may not only perform identity work within discourses, but also actively choose whether and to what extent they desire to be a part of a particular discourse.

Watson (2009a) finds that identity work-oriented research has taken two somewhat separate perspectives to examining discourse in entrepreneurship, at the structural level and at the individual level. Watson (2009a) argues that previous research on discourse in entrepreneurship has privileged individuals and agency, and that the effect of discursive structures, particularly available identity images, needs to be examined. This reflects in many ways the position Watson (2009b) adopts in a separate article, viewing identification and discourse through a more structuralist lens and arguing against excessive excessively emphasizing agency. Watson (2009a) also finds criticism more broadly in discourse-oriented research, arguing that Foucauldian concepts of discourse as 'totalizing' and dominating ignores the multiplicity and sheer size of human culture. Therefore arguing that one discourse, such as entrepreneurship, is totalizing or dominant necessarily ignores immense amounts of cultural and social resources and narratives available to individuals. Watson (2009a) takes issue with views presented by among others Ogbor (2000) which present entrepreneurship as a dominating and all-pervasive discourse in contemporary society.

Watson (2009a) rejects a narrative approach to discourse, and finds notions of constructing identities to be limiting in investigating identification and discourse. Watson (2009a) argues that such an approach does not give credit to individuals ability to hold multiple and diverse identity images. As such, Watson (2009a) finds that discourse may be more usefully investigated by viewing individuals as adopting or negotiating various culturally and socially available discursive notions that may be characterized as for example entrepreneurial stereotypes or images.

Cremin (2003), in approaching the discourse of entrepreneurship argues that entrepreneurship has become a dominant discourse in society, to the point that entrepreneurship and its associated character traits have permeated society. Cremin argues that this represents a creeping marketization of

individuals' selves, and that entrepreneurial discourse that privileges certain traits and identity images such as proactivity or sociability is subjecting all aspects of an individual to the public and to market forces. Arguments such as those made by Cremin (2003) have, according to Storey et al. (2005) contributed to influential arguments that entrepreneurial discourse has so thoroughly penetrated society as to coopt employees to reconstruct themselves and their identities in corporate terms that present identity features and personality traits as commoditized. Such schools of thought are aligned with *emancipatory* perspectives in identity and identification such as Alvesson and Willmott (2002) as explicitly referenced by Storey et al. (2005). Storey et al. (2005) find arguments regarding the 'totalizing' nature of discourse unconvincing, and rather approach identity as being constructed within discourse. In evaluating a context 'totalized' by entrepreneurial discourse, Storey et al. (2005) found that individuals did adopt elements of entrepreneurial discourse in their identity and identification, but that individuals did not become 'totalized'. Rather they used, in an agentic fashion, the discourse to both change their identity and protect their self-conceptions, to both integrate entrepreneurial discourse into their identity and to distance themselves from the discourse. Storey et al. (2005) finds that individuals are able to proactively – entrepreneurially – use discourses of entrepreneurship to deal with uncertainty and the potential of failure, the concept of which itself is strongly affected by discourse but also modified by individuals themselves.

Fenwick (2002) also identifies the existence of a strong discourse of entrepreneurship, and connects this discourse to a general increase on emphasis on individualism in contrast to previous forms and ways of identifying and organizing related to among others social class, gender roles, or other dominant cultural norms. This has also, summarizes Fenwick (2002), been perceived as an increasing tendency to view the individual and identity as a narrative or identity project that is constructed through experimentation and risk taking. Fenwick (2002) positions identity and identification in a post-modern context where identity is constructed, not assigned, and individuals are agentic identity workers striving for coherency and potentially stability. This has been connected with the increasing strength of an entrepreneurial discourse in society, where the self is construed through entrepreneurial discourse and the values related to it. However, despite the strong societal influence of entrepreneurial discourse and the attendant risk of control through discursive systems of individuals and employees by corporations, Fenwick (2002) concluded that individuals may also disassociate entrepreneurial discourse from corporate influences, creating 'post-corporate' entrepreneurship.

Discussion in research on entrepreneurship raise issues regarding agency and discourse also present in research on identity work and research specifically on the nature of agency. While for example Ogbor (2000) argues more in line with a dominating image of discourse and structure and Watson (2009a; 2009b) for a more agentic image of the individual, the tension of structure and agency is foregrounded in entrepreneurial research. There is considerable overlap in how entrepreneurial discourse provides agency to entrepreneurs and how entrepreneurial discourse limits and controls how entrepreneurs identify. This provides a fertile environment in which to investigate entrepreneurs' identity work and potential for agency.

3. METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research in marketing is often treated erroneously as a single, unitary, and homogeneous method and viewed as a "softer, interpretive, or naturalistic alternative for or complement to the established quantitative methods" (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006). Similarly McCracken (1988) finds limited and simplistic perspectives on qualitative research, particularly unstructured and long interviews common even among those more familiar to qualitative research. McCracken seeks to dispel, or rather demystify, conceptions surrounding qualitative interviews that take very specific, subject-centered, or even life-story approaches to conducting research.

Moisander and Valtonen (2006) find describing qualitative methods to be meaningful only in the context of explaining ontological and epistemological underpinnings of research philosophies behind each method, as do Jørgensen and Phillips (2002). As such, the research paradigm needs to be expressed to explain the philosophical basis for this research.

3.1 The Constructionist Paradigm

In order to conduct research into the identification and identity work of entrepreneurs, the subjective position of the individual must be considered. As such, a subjectivist ontological perspective is adopted, more specifically a constructionist perspective. According to constructionist understandings of reality, individuals construct their own subjective reality based on their interpretation of social reality (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). A constructionist ontological perspective of reality then does not exclude Structuralist perspectives that individuals perceive and experience in the context of broader social and cultural structures, but rather privileges an individual's subjective experienced reality in conducting research. Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008) explain that as constructionist research is interested in how individuals construct reality in a socially and culturally situated context, shared meanings and language provide a crucial avenue to examining what individuals construct as reality. Examining language as a means of conveying meaning provides information on not just what individuals construct as reality, but how this reality is constructed through the medium of language.

Discursive research or discourse analysis concerned with the shared meanings and practices that form discourses becomes the relevant methodological perspective to adopt in researching identification and identity work among entrepreneurs. Through this methodological orientation, shared meanings of

entrepreneurship and how they are transmitted, adopted, and monitored may be studied. Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008) identify three distinct forms of discourse analysis: social-psychological, Foucauldian, and critical discourse analysis. These categorizations of discourse analysis may be fairly accurately compared to the 'knowledge-constitutive interests' of Alvesson et al. (2008): Social Identification Theory as *technical*, Identity Work as *practical-hermeneutical*, and *emancipatory* points of view that emphasize societal power structures. In line with the identity work and *practical-hermeneutical* interest relevant for this research, Foucauldian discourse analysis and its focus on understanding discourses as frameworks and structures of power is relevant. Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008) identify problems in applying Foucauldian theory to practice, but notes that some language-oriented research has been undertaken. The Foucauldian-oriented research of Thornborrow and Brown (2009), Coupland and Brown (2015), or Alvesson and Willmott (2002) are examples of this.

Moisander and Valtonen (2006) also distinguish between different methodological perspectives of studying discourse, specifically within Consumer Culture Theory-oriented research. They distinguish between analysis of everyday discursive practices and analysis between culturally standardized or institutionalized discourses, with the former focusing on how individuals engage in discourse and through what cultural resources available, and the latter focusing on how standardized, institutionalized, or perhaps dominant discourses come to be and affect individuals through the discourse.

Moisander and Valtonen (2006) note that discourse, even if dealing with language, may include actions and practices because they can be part of a linguistic system or discourse.

Knights and Morgan (1991) note the strong influence of Foucault's work on how discourses are perceived to be structures of power through which norms and in fact social reality is constructed. Knights and Morgan (1991) understand discourse as "shorthand for a whole set of power/knowledge relations which are written, spoken, communicated and embedded in social practice." They note, however, that discourses are do not dominate or oppress individuals that participate in them, because a discourse requires room for interpretation by individuals.

Jørgensen and Phillips (2002, p.1) find that while there are diverse academic and philosophical approaches to discourse and discourse analysis, a common agreement exists in that language is not seen as neutral or realist depiction of the world, but rather as playing a role in "creating and changing" "our world, identities and social relations". Discourse is also intrinsically linked by Jørgensen and Phillips

(2002) to power relations in society, though they consciously exclude a Foucauldian approach to discourse from their review of literature. Foucault's influence on traditions of discourse analysis is clear, however, in how discourse is understood as being intrinsically linked to power, or how discourse is seen as a system of power that defines what truth and reality is. Jørgensen and Phillips (2002, p.12?) also summarize that discourse analysis almost by nature takes a critical stance to the 'known' and treats knowledge and meaning as culturally and societally situated. Jørgensen and Phillips (2002, p.20) summarize that differences exist in various understandings of discourse analysis regarding the extent to which discourse is either an intrinsic part of the world through language, behavior, practices, and norms or affected by these, as well as in whether discourse should be approached on an everyday, subjective level or on a more macro-societal level.

3.2 Method

Interviews have been selected as the primary method of data collection in this research, based on the common use of interviews in Consumer Culture Theory research and the necessity of approaching discourse on a day-to-day level in order to produce identity talk. The relative ease with which interviews can be conducted by graduate level researchers given previous interviewing experience and the scope of a Master's Thesis are also relevant considerations in selecting interviews as the primary method.

As Moisander and Valtonen (2006) noted that it is not meaningful to describe methods without delving into underlying ontological, epistemological, and methodological understandings, it is also worth noting that constructionist and subjectivist research assumes that an individual or researcher may not objectively conduct research. Researchers, as they cannot escape being part of society and discourse, and as they necessarily need to become closely familiarized to research contexts, run the risk of letting their subjectivity reduce the validity of their research or cloud research contributions (Arnould et al, 2006). The subjectivity of the researcher may be embraced as a tool for gaining a deeper understanding of a context and if the inherent subjectivity is acknowledged and generalizability is not claimed, the mediation of knowledge through the researcher's subjective interpretation is acceptable (McCracken, 1988).

To deal with questions regarding validity, generalizability, and reliability Moisander and Valtonen (2006, p.26) propose a number of criteria for evaluating good qualitative research. The importance of a particular topic to and the potential for development of a particular field of inquiry are proposed as criteria for good research in that it is relevant and innovative. The rigor with which particular methods, such as discourse analysis, is applied, as well as the rigor with which the philosophical underpinnings of the particular research method are applied is also proposed as a sign of quality and validity. Finally, the quality of writing and argumentation is naturally seen as a part of good research that is capable of claims to validity and reliability.

McCracken (1988) takes the aim of demystifying qualitative research in *The Long Interview* with the aim of making qualitative research, particularly – as the name suggests – long, unstructured interviews accessible to more researchers. McCracken (1988) points to differences in the research process of quantitative research and qualitative research, and reminds that the purpose in qualitative research is not to validate a hypothesis but to create new information in a more emergent fashion. As such, analytical categories are generally discovered only during or after data collection. These analytical categories are also marked or created more from interrelationships or commonalities in the data, as opposed to differences in quantitative research. Qualitative research in some ways trades precision for "complexity-capturing ability" (McCracken (1988).

As a basis of data processing in qualitative research, McCracken (1988) suggests – in addition to being aware of and managing the researchers own role in the research – using a four-step method of inquiry.

Review of Analytical Categories: conducting a literature review helps reduce personal preconceptions and creates distance between the researcher and the researched topic. Through this, one can "create opportunity for the violation of expectations" (McCracken, 1988). Additionally, a literature review naturally guides a researcher to topics relevant to the research and informs interview topics and interests.

Review of Cultural Categories: While a researcher may not remove oneself from the research, the researcher's subjectivity may be approached more as a resource. Drawing on one's own cultural understandings on a topic can both help to fill out gaps left in a literature review, as well as create more distance between the researcher and the topic by acknowledging one's own expectations and preconceptions. In fact a researcher's subjective understanding and meanings associated to a topic may be significant in understanding or translating how theory is reflected in practice (McCracken, 1988). In

other words, a researcher may use subjective knowledge to access informants' meanings and understand how theoretical concepts are visible in informants' contexts.

Discovery of Cultural Categories: an important aspect of conducting long, unstructured interviews is to remain unobtrusive, or in other words not guide, direct, or predispose informants to certain answers. Discovering cultural categories through field research can effectively be accomplished by progressing from unobtrusive questions to, if necessary, more prompting questions in order to elicit more talk. McCracken (1988) advises researchers to use 'grand-tour questions' or to elicit talk regarding some subject from informants. Information collected in this manner is valuable because it has usually been collected with minimal prompting and thus researcher mediation. McCracken (1988) does advise researchers to pursue 'planned prompts' in order to elicit talk when informants do not provide it by their own initiative. This can be achieved through asking informants to for example contrast between things, possibly reflecting back to their earlier testimony, or if nothing else by asking informants to categorize "key actors, central action, dramatic structure, important prompts, necessary audience, ascribed roles, designated critics, social significance, cultural significance, and the consequences of good or bad performance". Additionally, informants may be asked to recall particularly vivid incidents or memories related to a particular topic. Such methods are of course more intrusive and should be pursued generally only when unprompted talk has finished or not been forthcoming.

McCracken (1988) finds that when actually conducting an interview, the researcher must remain vigilant to several things. First, the researcher must establish oneself as a "benign, accepting, and curious" individual and engage in generally simple and unobtrusive questions in order to establish contact and 'get the informant going'. Second, the mention or emergence of key terms should be noted and possibly used later as reference points to elicit more talk regarding a term. Third, the researcher must be sensitive to notice informants attempting to impression manage or avoid topics, as well as to not misunderstand or misinterpret informants.

3.3 Matters of Representation

Lincoln and Guba (1994) point out several difference between positivist and constructivist paradigms, arguing that positivist ontological, epistemological, and methodological traditions should be more robustly challenged in the social sciences. They find that positivist positions do not often

adequately address the human-mediated nature of reality, and thus misrepresent some findings as too generalizable and valid. Constructivism as a paradigm is defended by Lincoln and Guba (1994) as providing more valid, if not generalizable, information on how humans actually perceive and give meaning to reality. They find that some arguments against constructivism such as those based on the nature of inquiry, the role of the researcher, and research rigor and quality are based in misunderstanding or ignorance of how constructivist research is conducted.

The nature of inquiry in constructivism is different in aims from positivist research, seeking understanding, and the role of the researcher as a co-creator of knowledge is unavoidable. In fact Lincoln and Guba (1994) claim that criticism of researchers being too involved and 'compromised' by their involvement in contexts and use of their own subjectivity as a research tool are based on the false assumption that positivist research paradigms successfully avoid mediation by researchers. Positivist paradigms portray the researchers as an objective outsider, and adopts the voice of a "disinterested expert" (Lincoln & Guba, 1994). However, in constructivist inquiry, the involvement of the researcher in the context is acknowledged, as is the fact that the inquirer is mediating the transfer of informants ontological constructs of reality. Thus, it is important to acknowledge that informants constructs of reality are in fact not solely their own, but versions of their reality as understood and conveyed by the researcher.

Lincoln and Guba (1994) argue that traditional positivist criteria for the quality of inquiry are not transferrable as such to a constructivist paradigm, and refer to their own earlier work:

> *"Two sets of criteria have been proposed: the trustworthiness criteria of credibility (paralleling internal validity), transferability (paralleling external validity), dependability (paralleling reliability), and confirmability (paralleling objectivity) (Guba, 1981; Lincoln & Guba, 1985); and the authenticity criteria of fairness, ontological authenticity (enlarges personal constructions), educative authenticity (leads to improved understanding of constructions of others), catalytic authenticity (stimulates to action), and tactical authenticity (empowers action) (Guba & Lincoln, 1989)."*

They further point out that these criteria themselves, being based on positivist criteria, are partially subject to the same assumptions regarding the quality of inquiry found in positivist research, and may thus not be perfectly applicable to constructivist research.

3.4 Analysis

As mentioned, McCracken's (1988) four-step method of inquiry for qualitative research conducted through long, unstructured interviews is the *Discovery of Analytical Categories*. Transcripts of interviews should be analyzed first at the face value of utterances, progressing to analyzing meanings behind utterances, and then establishing connections between various utterances to form tentative categories.

McCracken (1988) proposes that interviews should after being transcribed first be examined at face value. Various sections of the interviews should be examined simply to determine what an informant is talking about in each section, what they are claiming.
After this , the *utterances* may be treated as observations, and the researcher may attempt to determine or examine what the meaning behind an *utterances* is, initially in isolation, then in relation to other *utterances* in the transcript, and finally in relation to the literature review.
Once some meaning has been established for observations, the connectedness and relations between observations may be examined. At this stage McCracken (1988) advises that focus should have shifted away from the transcript and *utterance* to the observations themselves.
As a fourth step, a researcher should examine if themes emerge from the observations and the meanings that have been established to them.
Then, as a fifth step in the analytic process, themes that are emergent from an interview transcript may be compared to themes that are emergent in other transcripts.

Through this, as McCracken (1988) admits, somewhat mechanistic process of analysis and inquiry, a researcher may attempt to provide some structure to analyzing informants talk. Such structure is particularly valuable to more unexperienced researchers and interviewers, and as such this process of analysis, and more broadly process of inquiry is appropriate.

Moisander and Valtonen (2006, p.102) emphasize that analysis in marketing research that takes a cultural approach should not simply be "a set of technical operations and procedures through which researchers reduce, sort and manipulate qualitative data". McCracken's (1988) method, however, does not seek to impose a set of understandings or meanings from literature on informants talk, but rather seeks to systematize the method of linking emergent observations, meanings, and themes to literature. As such, a predetermined process of inquiry and analysis may be justified despite its mechanistic characteristics.

3.5 Agency and Communion

McAdams (2001) suggests that individuals' efforts to create life stories can be grouped into the two different themes of agency and communion. These two fundamental aspects of humanity may be used as a way of distinguishing types of identity narration and ways of relating to society and contexts.

"People high in power motivation emphasize the agentic themes of self-mastery, status and victory, achievement and responsibility, and empowerment in self-defining memories, and they tend to conceive of the story's main characters (imagoes) in highly agentic terms relative to people low in power motivation. By contrast, people high in intimacy motivation emphasize the communal themes of friendship and love, dialogue, caring for others, and sense of community in the significant scenes in their life stories, and they formulate highly communal imagoes such as the personifications of the self as "the caregiver," "the loyal friend," and "the lover." (McAdams, 2001)

The modalities of agency and communion are, according to McAdams et al. (1996), ways of seeing oneself either as an agentic individual or as seeing oneself as being in communion with a larger whole. McAdams et al. (1996) argue that agency and communion are present in and describe tendencies by individuals across many different fields of inquiry, and can be regarded as fundamental to humanity. The eight themes presented for agency and communion – four for each – are characteristic of the two different ways of being or imagining oneself.

Similarly, McAdams suggests that story narratives can be seen prototypically as contamination or redemption stories, where individuals go from good to bad and bad to good respectively. Fundamental structures of narratives such as contamination or redemption, or fundamental ways of grouping human thought and existence such as the concepts of agency and communion provide ways in which to organize behavior. As such, they can be used as ways of portraying and grouping identity and identification.

4. FINDINGS

In analyzing and processing informants' accounts of themselves as entrepreneurs, entrepreneurial discourse, and the entrepreneurial ecosystem, the usefulness of McAdams (2001) notion of using fundamental dualities of existence – agency and communion – as a tool for interpreting and describing identification is insightful. The notion of agency and communion forming underlying themes in how informants identified and engaged in identity work was useful, as there was a clear division in how informants discussed themselves as entrepreneurs. Informants' accounts of themselves as entrepreneurs, though to an extent overlapping both agency and communion, rather clearly conformed to either an overall theme of agency or communion. Informants generally either talked about themselves in terms of McAdams (1996) themes of *self-mastery*, *status and victory*, *achievement and responsibility*, and *empowerment* or in themes of *friendship and love*, *dialogue*, *caring for others*, and *sense of community*. Many informants also touched on themes in their non-dominant side of agency/communion, but in reflection of McAdams et al.'s (1996) coding scheme, informants fell in a general sense either into the agency or communion themes.

In the following sections, the identity talk of informants will be presented through explanation and excerpts from informants talk. Findings are presented in terms of informants' expressed motivations in engaging in entrepreneurship, in terms of how informants conceived of success in entrepreneurship, and in how informants' described the nature of entrepreneurship.

4.1 Communion

Informants conforming in a general sense to McAdams (2001) theme of communion expressed entrepreneurship in terms of friendship and love, dialogue, caring for others, and sense of community. Informant's talk will be presented in terms of **(1)** Dreams and passions as motivation, **(2)** Impact and social benefit as success measures, and **(3)** The collaborative nature of entrepreneurship.

4.1.1 Dreams and Passion as Motivation

One prominent theme that emerged from informants' identity talk was related to the way in which they described entrepreneurship and being an entrepreneur in terms of following their dreams

and being able to fulfill their desires. Informants aligning more strongly towards communion themes talked about their personal history and involvement in entrepreneurial activities in terms that emphasized their capacity to fulfill dreams that they had regarding what they wanted to do in their lives, as well as the way in which entrepreneurial activities allowed them to follow their passions.

The themes of following dreams and pursuing passions are characteristic of how informants' talk about themselves as entrepreneurs link to communion themes such as *dialogue* and *care/help* (McAdams et al., 1996). Informants aligning with communion describe their entrepreneurial activities in and through dialogue and communication with others. Entrepreneurship is also portrayed by informants as being motivated by a desire to help others individually and as a society, often emphasizing non-commercial motivations for this.

One common point made by informants is the power of agency (Campbell, 2009) conveyed by being an entrepreneur simply to decide what they will do during their day and what they will attempt to achieve:

> *Informant #2: "Entrepreneurship to me is I guess a sort of nice way to do things, you get to decide what you do but you have some responsibility as well, a double edged sword but nice I guess."*

Informants are aware of the fact that they can decide themselves what they will do and pursue, but also of the fact that they are therefore ultimately responsible for where their actions and decisions will lead them. This illustrates the fact that informants were aware of the short life-span of many start-ups and entrepreneurial undertakings, and of the general descriptions regarding the impending doom and 'running out of runway' that they faced. Informants made reference to the ability to make one's own mistakes as well:

> *Informant #6: "I'm not actually that much about making a lot of money, but more about serving customers or end users, although of course the money is also relevant. It is also about being able to make your own mistakes, eat your own dogfood."*

Here the ability to make one's own mistakes is framed as an expression of individual agency, as a necessary and unavoidable consequence of an individual's efforts to pursue one's goals in an uncertain and unstable environment. Desires to try out entrepreneurship and fulfill earlier nascent dreams of

being an entrepreneur were also expressed by informants in describing how they were pursuing their dreams through entrepreneurship:

> *Informant #9: "After Company B, I wanted to try out how it is like to have a company. I became interested after spending so many years in a big company. Having the possibility to try this out and support, that was the decision making point. Today there are people teaching students about entrepreneurship, so you can try things on your own, but this is a hard path as you have to do things on your own. And this is scary knowledge because many people are afraid to see on a complex level how to set up a company."*

In having transitioned from a large company and the corporate world into the world of entrepreneurship after significant restructuring and layoffs in Company B, the informant had experienced a major life change both in terms of personal and work life. By framing the decision to become an entrepreneur after work in the corporate world ended due to extra-personal reasons as a decision to pursue an earlier untrodden path, the implied agentic power (Campbell, 2009) of the individual to overcome structural forces is emphasized. This is in contrast to the very explicit structural forces that forced a change in life and work circumstances, and consequently a re-evaluation of both work and personal identity.

Informants' implicit and explicit assertions of agency, through being able to choose what they do and follow a dream to be an entrepreneur, are made in the context of structural constraints and forces. These constraints and forces necessarily create uncertainty about the future, present a ubiquitous risk of professional and even personal failure, and display the vulnerability of the individual to forces of change in society and business.

Another point made by informants relates to the portrayal of entrepreneurship as a means to pursue and realize ones' passions. These passions involved – in a broader sense – creating societal change and impact, as well as living and realizing beliefs regarding the collaborative nature of entrepreneurship – both of which are discussed in following sections. From a more emic perspective, these passions related to being able to unleash one's creative capabilities and imagination in an unconstrained environment, being able to engage in dialogue with likeminded people, and providing experience to others.

The motivations for pursuing an entrepreneurial path and identity can be woven into elaborate and compelling narratives regarding the empowering capacity of entrepreneurship for the individual.

Informants may present their history and background in entrepreneurship as being motivated by a desire to pursue one's passions:

> *Informant #3: "I studied broadly to find my passion. I use a shotgun method to shoot broadly and try things. I guess my passion is somewhere in between fields and connecting dots, and also to do things in a larger scope/sense … I worked when studying for industry, but this was not very rewarding as I was not able to pursue my interests."*

The informant emphasizes a pursuit of passion in the context of working and collaborating in various projects and organizations over the course of their studies and entrepreneurial journey. Through an emphasis on passion and self-fulfillment in work, studies, and entrepreneurship, a sense of agency is constructed. Managing the structural constraints and uncertainty of being a student/entrepreneur is framed as finding one's own way and crafting one's own story.

Again, framing these various experiences in terms of seeking one's passion is an expression of agency in the context of an environment in which entrepreneurs struggle:

> *Informant #3: "A lot of starting entrepreneurs really struggle with supporting themselves despite a lot of great ideas. People seeing struggling aspiring entrepreneurs may also very strongly discourage others from entrepreneurship"*

The same informant, despite a focus on framing work and studies as exploring passions and interests through entrepreneurial activities, draws attention to the struggles that aspiring entrepreneurs are faced with. The struggles of entrepreneurship – and the possibility that outsiders may see entrepreneurship negatively or as a struggle – have implications on entrepreneurs' own identity work. Overly negative views of entrepreneurship may threaten identity investments (Arsel and Thompson, 2011) and work against a positive identity image, and an emphasis on passion as motivation may help in subverting uncertainty and risk emanating from structural forces such as lack of resources.

The informant narrated the experience of going to a creative, non-commercial festival several times, and the inspiring nature of building exhibits and experience to participants there:

> *Informant #3: "The events were sort of transformative in that you get to see the results of just passion at work with no other interests and how people work together. No one gets a salary but everyone offers lots of time and resources. Interesting to see how it is to work in an environment with no rewards in terms of money or potential career advancement. A*

prototype of a community or company, enormously multidisciplinary environment, no titles or status there."

This experience served in a central role in elaborations regarding the pursuit of entrepreneurship in search of passion. The emphasis on the unleashed creative capacities of participants and on an idealized non-commercial community underline an understanding and interpretation of entrepreneurship as being creative and communal in contrast to growth-driven and fiercely competitive. The descriptions of the festival take the air of an idealized image of entrepreneurship as a source of unrestrained self-actualization. By eliminating competitive and personal motivations for entrepreneurship, something greater is reached: an environment where one is free to innovate and create without structures and limits. However, despite this emphasis the presence of more mundane interests is evident:

Informant #3: "You meet people there who you may run into later in entrepreneurship circles … I am also part of preparing for a new project, we got seed funding and now looking for more funding. The team around the festival project is constantly growing and now we have a lot of top talent in different fields ex. sound design, architecture, movie design. This also makes getting funding easier in the future."

It is evident that the project, while motivated by passion towards creative and collaborative work, is not independent from structural forces in entrepreneurship. Participating in this project also serves the purpose of networking in the entrepreneurship ecosystem, allowing contacts to be carried over from the idealized environment of the festival. The successes of the event projects can clearly also be expressed in terms of development and achievement more in line with McAdams (2001) agency, as well as be leveraged regarding structural constraints such as the need for funding and career prospects. This reveals that the necessary constraints and realities that entrepreneurs face cannot be avoided, but also implicitly that even in narratives and portrayals of entrepreneurship in line with McAdams (2001) communion that establish the individuals agency the structural forces are also present.

4.1.2 Communion through Impact and Social Benefit as Success Measures

Informants whose identity talk regarding their entrepreneurial identities conformed more strongly to McAdams (2001) theme of communion also emphasized the relevance of societal benefit and creating social impact in measuring the success of their entrepreneurial efforts. These measures were seen as significant and at times more relevant than traditional financial success measures.

Informants talk regarding their desire to see social change and impact reflect McAdams et al.'s (1996) communion themes of *care/help*, as well as *community*. Through creating impact and social change, informants addressed desires to help society in a larger sense through addressing problems that society faces regarding for example climate change or keeping up with changes in the world. Informants also addressed the *care/help* theme on a personal level, as several informants made reference to their own children and discussed their desire to help and create change through their children. The theme of *community* was also broadly addressed in informants positioning of themselves as part of society, and thus responsible for developing it. This represents having a stake in society even in an elaboration of one's entrepreneurial identification.

The strongest theme regarding informants identity talk concerning social change and impact was related to informant's positioning of their entrepreneurial efforts in terms of new Key Performance Indicators (KPI's) and success measures that take into account not only traditional commercial measures of success. These new, social measures of success are expressed in informants' descriptions of their entrepreneurial work:

> *Informant #1: "The default in entrepreneurship is to seek profit and success, edutech is different in that it is focused on impact, figuring what are successful methods, and how stakeholders are affected … We may not be on the same line as companies that measure purely profit or use traditional KPIs. If one looks just at our bottom line, we don't match up. We have to be clear about what our goals are – impact – and make sure the entire team knows this. The vision has to be clear for the whole team, and the team needs to be motivated by these KPI's."*

The need for new measures of success is presented as necessary to fully address how a startup or entrepreneur is creating social change and impact. This is in the light that entrepreneurs may find it difficult to gain market approval and validation for their ideas even though they have potential to create societal change. Framing oneself as creating social impact and having agency through this impact addresses tensions and doubts that entrepreneurs may have about finding legitimization in entrepreneurial discourse, as well as limitations regarding their ability to maintain a positive identity image.

By framing themselves as seeking not only market validation through commercial success, but also seeking social impact, informants are creating agency in the context of problems that entrepreneurs face in finding validation for possibly idealistic goals:

> *Informant #3: "I don't know how to say this without sounding like a Millennial, but we are on the brink of a sixth industrial revolution, so now it is all about making better use of resources, both human and natural … We were looking for a certain seed investment, but learned that getting funding in our industry is difficult as it is slightly more long-term than for example apps and there is a longer ROI and maybe less scalability."*

There is a conflict between the desire to address pressing societal challenges and create a better future on one hand, and on the other hand the difficulties entrepreneurs may run into in trying to gain validation though success measures centered on commercial potential. Instead of KPI's indicating success through more traditional measures such as growth and profits, a more altruistic and social perspective may be adopted to foreground successes. This may enable a more positive and coherent image of one's entrepreneurial efforts, and in turn tap into the images and mythology of agency related to entrepreneurship both in contemporary society and historically.

Informants were aware of the difficulties they may face in gaining funding and being viewed as successful in an entrepreneurial sense, and the downside of sticking to an idea despite a lack of market validation was recognize as well:

> *Informant #6: "I see that Sisu is often valued in Finland, sticking to an idea and trying year after year. What I would like to see is if you are not getting the evidence that this will succeed, just fail. No point in ruining your life on a bad idea just because you are afraid of being wrong or admitting failure … I have absolutely had these experiences myself. There have been times when we just had to decide we must stop or pivot even though we might lose some business in order to get the business scaling properly."*

While emphasizing the importance of creating social impact – and the significance of being able to find motivation in your ability to create this impact – is significant in establishing a sense of agency against dominant commercial motivations in entrepreneurial discourse, the force of structural constraints was evident. Entrepreneurs embracing social impact have to face the same realities regarding funding, company and personal risk, and their future as all other entrepreneurs. This was evident in informants' comments, as failure as an entrepreneur was seen in terms of 'hard' KPI's like profit or growth despite

the adoption of alternative KPI's more suited for example for a particular sub-field of entrepreneurship. Concerns related to unsatisfactory KPI's and subsequent threats to entrepreneurial agency could be reframed through adopting an emphasis on social impact and social benefit, thus creating a stronger sense of entrepreneurial success and agency.

Informants also expressed their desire to create social change and impact from a more emic and personal perspective, taking inspiration from their own lives and families. In some informant's accounts, the framing of own entrepreneurial motivations as the desire to create social change in general was also framed as an interest to help and improve the future of one's own children as well:

> *Informant #9: "The key idea is to leverage the Finnish gaming industry and gamify learning experience to bring enjoyment to kids in teaching, create gamified lessons … The world is changing and people are multitasking, we should enable people and kids to enjoy this. Education should follow natural changes as well … The key idea came from our everyday life. And is something around which we could create a product that is good for us as well as good for society."*

Through viewing one's own entrepreneurial efforts as being motivated by and also helping one's own children, a sense of agency is created that emphasizes not only the commercial success or social impact of one's entrepreneurial efforts, but also one's ability to directly enable children. This allows a sense of success and agency to be embraced potentially in the face of a lack of commercial success or success on impact measures. The success and results of entrepreneurial efforts may be measured and reaped in a much more immediate sense through one's own family or children. A stronger and more socially legitimized entrepreneurial identity may be claimed through foregrounding the realized benefits – benefits to children – through adopting social impact as a measure of entrepreneurship and agency.

Similarly, the ability to directly help society can be foregrounded in what entrepreneurship is about:

> *Informant #6: "Now that I am turning 40, the money side is relevant and the potential for making money, but as I've gotten older I have started caring more about impact and doing something that you can be proud of. Doing things that really help or affect peoples' lives. I guess having kids is a good way to learn empathy, it helps you to understand what is really important in life."*

Entrepreneurial goals can be framed as largely altruistic, establishing a sense of agency in being able to create social impact independent over any objective measures of financial or social success.

Entrepreneurial efforts may be seen as successful in their own right, whether or not they are profitable or scalable, and therefore also bypassing structural limits to entrepreneurial agency such as resources. A sense of agency as an entrepreneur may be established simply on the merit that what one is doing is significant and impactful enough to exhibit the ability to create change and determine the results of one's work.

Framing entrepreneurial goals in more personal terms allows the separation of a sense of agency from constraints placed by organizational structures:

> *Informant #6: "I worked in a big corporation right before this, and it was a bit too difficult to get things done and influence things … In startups we could make decisions very quickly, and pivot quite easily. Here I can make decisions within my own sandbox, but cannot change the core things."*

Escaping corporate structures and limits on action can in itself be seen as a way of establishing agency and enabling a focus on more personal interests, such as the social impact mentioned earlier.

As evident from informants' identity talk, they use the desire to create social impact and change as a way to establish agency and support their personal beliefs about what entrepreneurship should achieve. However, the structural forces of both the financial reality of many entrepreneurs' lives, as well as the general discourse regarding entrepreneurship primarily in terms of commercial and growth potential affect entrepreneurs' efforts to establish agency. The success of informants in creating a sustainable, coherent, and positive identity image is dependent on their ability to embrace and believe in their own identity talk, though this is not a certain path to success either as evident from one informants earlier experiences.

4.1.3 The Collaborative Nature of Entrepreneurship

Evident as a theme in informants identity talk were comments regarding the nature of entrepreneurship as consisting of collaboration and co-creation. The significance of meeting, discussing with, and sharing with other people was evident, as well as a focus by communion-oriented informants in emphasizing the significance of cooperating with others to realize their entrepreneurial ambitions. The significance of the entrepreneurial ecosystem and structures in promoting dialogue and cooperation

was also mentioned, along with the significance of acting as a teacher in turn to other aspiring entrepreneurs.

The themes of collaboration and co-creation that emerged from interviews correlate to McAdams (2001) communion themes of *dialogue* and *care/help*. The *dialogue* theme is expressed in informants' comments regarding the significance of sharing and openness in meeting new people and networking. The *care/help* theme is evident in how some informants mention participating in mentoring or helping team members achieve their potential.

A strong theme from the interviews of entrepreneurs was the significance attributed to working collaboratively in groups, and being able to share ideas and progress with a team. On a surface level this was seen as simply pleasant as a work environment and method, particularly in contrast to non-entrepreneurial work experiences:

> *Informant #1: "Working as an entrepreneur is different than working as consultant/employee, it is more open and focused on helping others, one can have stake, focus long term on a goal."*

The collaborative and open nature of entrepreneurship that is mentioned is seen simply as a more pleasant environment to work in, and positions entrepreneurship as a preferable environment to work in over being a regular employee in a company. Viewing entrepreneurship as a more collaborative work environment allows informants to present a largely unstructured entrepreneurial setting as a positive aspect of being entrepreneurial. While a collaborative working style may in fact be preferable to informants, it is also necessary in order to be successful as an entrepreneur and thus not necessarily as much of a conscious choice as informants have an incentive to believe.

The positive aspects of working collaboratively as an entrepreneur in a small team is also mentioned in contrast to working alone:

> *Informant #2: "When we were working freelance, your ass was always on the line as you were responsible and had sold the job. But even now we have a project that is looking tight and we have to finish it, but I feel like we now have clarity and tools for addressing this internally and for getting external help unlike back when there were only a couple people."*

The benefits of working in a small team over working previously as a freelancer is brought to the foreground, allowing for greater sharing of stresses and burdens. This in turn serves to enable oneself to

overcome problems and doubts, establishing agency for the individual through group cooperation. This, again, is in contrast to the reality of an entrepreneurs' or startup's financial and ontological security. A focus on the positive aspects of working in a small group and sharing burdens belies the structural limitations placed on an entrepreneur's ability to be highly agentic and creative as in mythological, religious, and historical images of entrepreneurship.

The significance of being open and meeting people was brought out by informants repeatedly as they narrated accounts of how seemingly chance encounters turned out to be significant for their opportunities and development as an entrepreneur:

> *Informant #3: "I met the person starting the space company while discussing in the Aalto Design Factory Tongji, and we talked broadly about what it would take to change a fairly old-fashioned industry like the space industry. There were not many studies related to space back then, but we were able to visit SpaceX and CERN and look around at things."*

Working on one particular project, meeting a new person, discussing and sharing their views on how to renew the industry cumulatively led to the opportunity to work in the current company for the informant. Being open and meeting people is cast in a positive light, as it allows one to meet new people and ideas without many of the social barriers present in other areas of society. In this sense, the emphasis on the collaborative nature of entrepreneurship serves as a way to give agency to the individual to meet, explore, and realize themselves. A similar experience is recounted:

> *Informant #3: "I got involved in the creative festival by meeting one main organizer in Vietnam by accident and teaching him to drive a motorcycle, I had no idea who he was at the time. I also got involved when some artists asked me in China to participate in a regional event. Finally, I met a guy in the startup scene who was organizing an Aalto festival event and got involved in that. Part randomness and part being in surroundings that support these sorts of encounters."*

Again, the role of meeting, sharing, and connecting with people is mentioned. Seemingly random encounters turn out to have immense significance for the individual, allowing one to pursue novel and exciting paths and experiences. However, for all the apparent agentic capacity bestowed by the open and accessible nature of opportunities in the entrepreneurial context, the underlying randomness of such encounters may also be seen in reverse. The networking, sharing, and dialogue that is mentioned as a significant part of being entrepreneurial and receptive to new ideas and opportunities is in many

senses a necessity. As new opportunities and chances for advancement appear randomly and at chance, aspiring entrepreneurs must always be ready to engage and impress potential contacts. Meeting and discussing with new people, while potentially also personally rewarding, is then a necessity for individuals, imposed by outside structures and practices that dominate in entrepreneurial contexts.

In apparent contrast to descriptions of collaboration and meeting new people as a positive side of entrepreneurship, the necessity of being goal-oriented in social interactions comes up in some interviews. There are strong references to social interactions and meeting new people as serving to advance entrepreneurial or company goals:

> *Informant #3: "I have been to Slush every year, sometimes I go to meetings myself or with the CEO to meet potential investors … You never know at these events when the most significant encounters are, for example at afterparties just chitchatting, they are sort of like tinder, quantity over quality where you just chat with a lot of people."*

Events such as Slush can with some authority be called festivals of entrepreneurship, where the goal of attendees may be the experience, inspiration, and motivation gained from the event in addition to more mundane business gains. In a more critical interpretation, however, the significance of random encounters and networking with people present in informants' comments may be seen as an indication of how entrepreneurship requires total and constant engagement to entrepreneurship. While potentially also enabling the individual to pursue entrepreneurial goals and ambitions, entrepreneurial ecosystems and environments also portray the entrepreneur as constantly ready to meet a new important contact, but never quite knowing how mundane the context of this meeting may be. In this sense entrepreneurship may be seen as an almost dominating structure and discourse, requiring an aspiring entrepreneur to commit themselves and their time to collaboration in order to be entrepreneurial and potentially achieve success.

The emphasis on entrepreneurship as being realized through collaboration and co-creation is also apparent on a more company level:

> *Informant #5: "My teammates say that I'm a networking specialist. I go to an event and come up with so many contacts. I know I have to develop on making the follow-ups. We want to make lots of alliances, that is our strategy. We have a lot of dealings with lots of other entrepreneurs. I have a philosophy that as a startup you have a wall that you have to hit through. Individually you are a finger, but together you are a fist, so would you rather hit*

through this wall as a finger and create a small hole or as a fist. I'd rather team up with startups making a slightly different angle in a similar field and then being in contact with distributors and larger companies. It is difficult for us because making B2B or B2C is difficult, but making B2B2C through for example a rental agency is easier."

Cooperation is significant for companies as well, as they face the difficulties of overcoming competition and scarce resources. In this context the ability to connect and network is portrayed as agentic in enabling the company to realize the benefits of cooperation between startups. The same necessity for constantly being on the lookout for new alliances, however, penetrates into all interactions in the entrepreneurial context. The unbound opportunities that may be imagined to await aspiring entrepreneurs and startups can be contrasted to the more stark reality that individual companies and entrepreneurs are facing significant challenges in staying financially viable and thus being able to continue their entrepreneurship. Being collaborative as a company is seen as resenting significant advantages over working alone, and while possibly true, signifies that the collaboration that some informants saw as a positive and enabling part of entrepreneurship is in fact not voluntary at all. Presenting collaboration as a positive and aspirational form of entrepreneurship may be seen as an attempt to exert agency over structural forces that demand constant and deep collaboration.

Another theme that emerged from informants' comments regarding the cooperative and collaborative nature of entrepreneurship was the way that the entrepreneurial ecosystem – consisting of various organizations promoting entrepreneurship, accelerators, and events like Slush – promoted these traits:

Informant #3: "This was possible because of Aalto and the ecosystem, it provided opportunities to participate in as many projects and collaborations as one wanted to. Aalto was an enabler in opening my eyes and horizons to what I could do. Aalto ES started around the time when I started, and I associated entrepreneurship more to starting one's own pizzeria. Now I see it more broadly … Being part of and participating in the ecosystem was a lot of work with little or no salary, but I tried to make the most of it during my studies."

The broad entrepreneurial ecosystem is seen as a significant enabler of entrepreneurship, both in the sense that it opens up new impressions and views regarding entrepreneurship, as well as in the sense that it provides numerous opportunities to concretely participate in entrepreneurship. The portrayal and emphasis on the agency bestowed by the ecosystem to the individual in becoming an entrepreneur is

contrasted by the reality that this process involves in practice significant amounts of commitment for participation. This may be contrasted to how other industries or parts of society are viewed where new members, by necessity, have to work for potentially years for little or no pay in order to have a chance of being successful for example through unpaid internships. In an entrepreneurial context this financial and ontological insecurity for the individual may be seen as potentially positive, and can be argued to be an example of how entrepreneurial discourse and structural forces exert themselves on the way individuals perceive themselves. While enabling agency to the individual, a structure such as the ecosystem also requires commitment and investment to it.

The role of entrepreneurial structures and the ecosystem is also elaborated on in how they serve startups in early stages:

> *Informant #5: "There was quite a lot of the experience that should be taught to a company before they start and at an early stage, because in my experience it is good to have accelerators in the seed stage, but it is possible to have quite a lot of mistakes in the pre-seed stage. To avoid these mistakes in the very early stages would be beneficial … taking the loan in the early stage, of course it was forced in that we couldn't get anything from Business Finland, and now recovering from this and developing has made a huge change to my personality and toughened me."*

The informant describes having taken a loan for the company and then embarking on several accelerators that ultimately resulted in a pivot regarding the business idea. As a result of pursuing and developing the business idea, there is now some debt from the earlier attempts at earlier business ideas. The process of ideating and developing new startup ideas, and after this seeking funding and potentially participating in accelerators has the potential to greatly enhance a startup's and entrepreneurs opportunities and resources. However embarking on an entrepreneurial path also carries risk, and can result in very concrete limitations like debt. Clearly not all experience of going through the ecosystem and making use of the opportunities afforded by open and collaborative working practices have been interpreted as entirely agentic.

Another informant described the experience of moving from a large company into entrepreneurship, and making use of the support provided by this company in learning about entrepreneurship:

> *Informant #9: "We had been sitting together and workshopping, and this idea just came up. We were looking for an idea that would not be covered and that we could execute … We*

came from a large company, so we got a lot of help. There have been some intensive sessions about key areas like marketing, etc. and all the things that every company needs to have. In the large company we saw all the areas, but of course we didn't know exactly how everything works."

The process of adopting an entrepreneurial mindset is described in terms emphasizing working together with former colleagues, as well as working with the organizations set up to help in the transition to entrepreneurship. The opportunities for creative and collaborative work were ultimately not originally voluntary, but were necessary in order to gain further employment and future security. Despite being to some extent forced into an entrepreneurial mindset, individuals from Company B were willing to adapt an entrepreneurial mindset along with the necessity for collaboration and uncertainty this entailed. The talk of the importance of collaboration may therefore be seen as imposed rather than voluntary.

The transition to entrepreneurship presented a significant change to working in a corporate setting as described by the informant:

Informant #9: "This changed my life upside down, because here you have to do all kinds of tasks and multitask and be multitalented. There is a lot to learn. The budget is very important, how much you have. We have invested in this company from our own company and we got some support as well. This defines what you can do and who you can get to do things."

Various support networks and the collaborative nature of entrepreneurship are mentioned, and seen as having helped in the transition, but this transition proved to be a tumultuous event. The emphasis on seeing entrepreneurship as collaborative in a broad sense, and the emphasis on the significance of various support networks can be seen as establishing agency over ones future in a transition period.

Finally, a theme that emerged in some interviews regarding the collaborative nature of entrepreneurship involved informants' experiences in acting as mentors and guides for others in the entrepreneurial context:

Informant #3: "I was mentoring at UltraHack for ESA and UN about how to make the world a better place at various locations in Helsinki and Vantaa."

Informant #6: "Being an entrepreneur is also about being a leader for a group of people. I also love creating an atmosphere of trust for people."

Positioning oneself as a mentor and guide to others may establish agency through themes of help and care. Having purpose and significance as a mentor or guide to others in entrepreneurial contexts is identification that is independent of many of the structural forces that affect entrepreneurs' lives. As such, seeing oneself partly as a mentor or guide can serve to alleviate tensions between establishing oneself as agentic in contrast to structural pressures that entrepreneurs face on other fronts. Again, despite that fact that the informants may certainly have enjoyed acting as guides or mentors, the sense of agency gained from such experiences may be contrasted with earlier descriptions of how entrepreneurship as a discourse and the entrepreneurial ecosystem as a structure necessitate collaborative behavior.

4.2 Agency

Informants conforming in a general sense to McAdams (2001) theme of *agency* expressed entrepreneurship in terms of *self-mastery, status and victory, achievement and responsibility,* and *empowerment*. Informant's talk will be presented in terms of **(1)** Business success as motivation, **(2)** Growth and market validation as success measures, and **(3)** The individualistic nature of entrepreneurship.

4.2.1 Business Success as Motivation

One theme that emerged from agency-oriented informants talk regarding their motivations for entrepreneurship was a desire to be successful, both in terms of financial rewards and as an entrepreneur. Informants describe both explicitly financial success, as well as more broadly success in entrepreneurship as the reasons for pursuing entrepreneurship as opposed to notions of pursuing dreams and fulfilling passions evident in more communion-oriented informants' motivations.

The described motivations for entrepreneurship align with McAdams et al.'s (1996) themes of *self-mastery* and *achievement/responsibility*. The theme of *self-mastery* can be seen to correspond to informants desires to first become independent of the environment and structural forces, and then exert influence on them. The theme of *achievement* may be seen to correspond to informants portraying overcoming challenges or taking on high-responsibility positions as establishing agency.

The topic of financial pressures and realities was discussed from one angle or another by all informants, and some informants made direct and unprompted reference to desiring financial goals:

> *Informant #4: "Personally my goal is to build a company and help others learn through tasks and responsibility, and of course I also have hard goals regarding financials … My most important goal is to build the team and culture here, also I like the impact we have in society in reducing food waste, but I enjoy the business side and hope that it will grow and be a good reference in the future for all of us. Most likely, the company will be sold at some point, so I want to learn from this."*

Goals regarding financial success are mentioned, and though motivations regarding creating a positive environment to work are mentioned, these are coached in terms of helping others learn to be more successful in their own tasks and goals. In contrast to other informants, selling the company is mentioned as a likely outcome. This suggests a prioritization of financial success, as well as potential future career options, over success as an entrepreneur in a broader sense. In this sense agency as an entrepreneur is created by having an explicit start and end for one's entrepreneurial ambitions, and therefore resisting being thoroughly colonized by entrepreneurial discourse. In other words, seeing oneself as pursuing entrepreneurship as a way of learning and achieving a financial outcome is a way of resisting or rejecting other interpretations of entrepreneurship.

Others also make reference to specific sums of money as eventual goals to strive for as well:

> *Informant #5: "One of my personal goals is to at 30 years old have 30 million euros, so two years' time! But of course I want to build dreams of my own, and make them a good environment for others as well that is inspiring and enables others to make their dreams as well. To basically make my living with my own dreams that I have built. To be able to also not work 24/7, but to work a lot of course, but also have a lot of hobbies and have a family as well, basic stuff … I have two startups and we are building a group of companies in the long run."*

While a reference to a specific financial goal is made, a desire to experience success as an entrepreneur in a broader sense is also expressed. Fulfilling one's own dreams and enabling others to do so as well is mentioned, but this is framed within the context of becoming successful. Making bold statements regarding desired goals, both financial and entrepreneurial, can be seen as an effort to make a statement and establish agency over outside forces faced by early-stage startups, specifically often regarding

funding and near-term financial concerns. The desire to become financially successful aims to both gain success as an entrepreneur and establish agency through success, as well as escape the forces necessitating this success. While achieving or aspiring for this may be seen as an expression of agency, the background structures that affect and create this aspiration exert themselves on the individual and limit the degree to which their goals and identity aspirations are agentic.

Statements emphasizing the potential for success in entrepreneurship may also be affected by other factors:

> *Informant #5: "I ended up being an entrepreneur by accident because of the bankruptcy. I really haven't made that decision, it has grown on me. Nowadays I would feel more stressed working for someone else than working for me. Or at least the stress would be very different, as an early stage entrepreneur it is running away from running out of runway or bankruptcy. There is this financial stress, but work related stress is very, very low for me. I would be much more stressed working in a large company with a small silo, and seeing there are so many things in this company that don't work."*

Establishing oneself as very clearly seeking success as both an entrepreneur and in terms of financial gain may be seen in the context of having drifted into entrepreneurship to begin with. By portraying oneself as agentic in terms aligning to McAdams et al.'s (1996) themes of *self-mastery* and *achievement/success*, agency may be asserted in the face of structural forces and extra-personal events such as financial pressures common to start-ups or bankruptcies. Agency may be exerted by embracing the negative aspects of the narrative of why one became an entrepreneur and framing this as positive over other negative aspects of for example working in a larger organization. Despite this, the uncertainty and stress related to both the origins and current circumstances of entrepreneurial activities are clearly present.

The assertion of success as the motivation for entrepreneurship may also be described as being innate or coming from deep in one's background:

> *Informant #7: "I have an academic background in technology and have fifteen years' experience in working life. I was supposed to go back to university, but ended up starting a new company within 30 days of landing in Helsinki … We have discussions often with my wife over good business ideas, and I often conduct research and do calculations at home on*

the viability of ideas. In the end I have only tried to make a business out of some of these about 40 ideas. My mindset has been built in from my family background."

The interest to evaluate ideas for success potential and pursue them is presented as a motivation for entrepreneurship. In this case, reference to previous experience in entrepreneurship and in work life is made to present the efforts in pursuit of entrepreneurial success as more legitimate in the context of entrepreneurial discourse. Through positioning oneself as a serial entrepreneur with experience in pursuing entrepreneurial success, an assertion of agency as an entrepreneur can be made. This establishes the individual as an evaluator and judge of business ideas, and as someone who has numerous options available to pursue if desired.

The emphasis on being entrepreneurial and innovative may be viewed in light of restricting and limiting circumstances:

Informant #7: "I was forced to move from a large company to working to myself to some extent, but I liked it. It did not feel too different to me, as I had been doing planning and assessment for projects in the past as well. There was not such a large difference in working to be honest … I was looking for a job on the side … I was looking for some job while studying not to just see my savings go out the window."

Moving to a new country and trying to settle in both on a personal and professional level presents its challenges, and demonstrates that outside forces exerted significant influence over choices made. In this context emphasis of oneself as innately entrepreneurial and an experienced entrepreneur may be seen as creating a sense of agency through *self-mastery* and *achievement/success* in the face of environmental reasons for life decisions. A discursively established sense of agency may be contrasted to the significant structural challenges facing entrepreneurial aspirations and the necessity of immediate financial security. Again, a focus on business success as a motivation for entrepreneurship may be seen as a reaction to significant challenges facing entrepreneurs in contrast to a natural or innate desire to be successful.

4.2.2 Growth and Market Validation as Success Measures

The significance of achieving growth for their business idea and gaining market validation for this idea emerged as themes in informants identity talk. Informants' talk regarding these topics aligned

with McAdams' (2001) notion of agency, in that individuals used growth and market validation as tools of portraying themselves as agentic in the context of assorted difficulties and structural constraints.

Regarding McAdams et al.'s (1996) elaboration on the components of the state of being of agency, individuals' identity talk corresponded to themes of *self-mastery*, *status*, and *achievement/responsibility*. The theme of *self-mastery* was evident in informants' comments regarding efforts to break from entrepreneurial or field-related structures and thus asserting agency. The theme of *status* was evident in comments regarding desires to achieve a certain level of wealth, a position among top global companies, or as being a top-performing company in Finland in some context. The theme of *achievement/responsibility* was evident in informants' comments that cast themselves as agentic in taking on challenges and responsibilities in pursuing growth and market validation.

Informants displaying alignment to themes of McAdams (2001) agency sought to bring to the fore their desires to achieve or reach a degree of market validation for their ideas and their efforts in pursuing these ideas. An example of this comes from a social entrepreneurship startup:

> *Informant #1: "The Association for Finnish Work has a badge for social entrepreneurship, but we have not wanted to seek it. We want to maintain freedom and flexibility – we're slightly anarchist in this – and we seek to prove our social responsibility through what we do."*

The comment reveals the informants desire to achieve a measure of success through measures that are not common for social entrepreneurs, achieving success through market validation of the business potential of the idea. This can be categorized as an assertion of self-mastery, in that it breaks with the environment – social entrepreneurial norms – and asserts a desire to a type of superiority over social entrepreneurs that may not be able to succeed without the social entrepreneurship badge.

Another example of how informants constructed themselves as entrepreneurs through achieving market validation can be seen in future plans for a company:

> *Informant #2: "We could in the future be either a product house, more a consulting company, in bankruptcy as well I guess. I am a bit of a realist in that I don't like to speculate enormously with what we or I could do in the future."*

Musings regarding what exactly the company could end up being in the future can be seen as tentative identification as an entrepreneur through achieving market validation. Becoming a product house or a

consulting company implicitly means succeeding in this field. Emphasizing potential ways in which the company and one's entrepreneurial efforts could be validated by market structures conveys a sense of agency regarding the desire and means to achieve this, reflecting the theme of achievement/responsibility. The uncertainty involved in most entrepreneurial endeavors, however, is clearly evident in comments that the whole undertaking could fail. This foregrounds how tenuous identification as an entrepreneur achieving success can be, as there is no guarantee that any endeavor will succeed in the fast-moving and uncertain world of entrepreneurs.

Positioning oneself as a successful and agentic entrepreneur through market validation can also be seen in an informants comments regarding their plans to succeed with their product:

> *Informant #7: "We design a modular product designed to stand 10 years, with three pieces. We have aligned these parts to go with the existing supply chain. Ex. Google failed because they attempted to split the product into too many pieces and went against the existing supply chain … Next step is to achieve a compatible system from Sony, Amazon, even Ikea. There are many non-tech companies as well that have sought to enter this market. We might break the hold of component manufacturers, like IBM standardization in PCs in the past, allowing computers to be upgraded etc."*

The informant aspires to develop and advance the business idea through making a fundamental change to the way that the products are sold by tech companies, though by accepting and embracing some current supply chain norms. By attempting and seeking to change the way the industry and market works, a sense of agency is emphasized in the individual's ability to affect change over enormously high-level structures. This is in line with the theme of self-mastery and achieving a separation from the environment in creating agency, as well as the theme of achieving status by contrasting ones company to iconic and influential companies. However, these grand ambitions are still constrained by the realities of being an entrepreneur:

> *Informant #7: "We have 15 working shareholders, but here it is mostly just me … I recruited people as working shareholders who were entrepreneurs and SME owners because there was doubt in Finland after Nokia and Jolla. We only got public investment from TEKES in the early rounds. They probably were averse to our field."*

While a sense of the agentic capability of the entrepreneur as able to affect change in society and over structures can be cultivated in identity talk, the difficulties faced by entrepreneurs in achieving this are

nonetheless visible. There are clearly significant limitations in the ability to create change in this market area, as society and support structures in the entrepreneurial environment are not supportive of endeavors in this particular field. The constructed sense of agency emanating from being able to potentially challenge industry giants is tempered by the reality that entrepreneurial efforts are still largely constrained by a lack of funding and support from society and the entrepreneurial ecosystem. In light of a lack of enthusiasm towards the previously mentioned industry, but also more generally, it may be necessary for entrepreneurs to present themselves as agentic and as having potential to disrupt an industry. Otherwise gaining access to funding and support from the entrepreneurial ecosystem may prove to be even more difficult. The emphasized agentic capacity of the entrepreneur to gain market success may be contrasted with the necessity of appearing capable of success in order to get the opportunity.

In addition to seeking to establish themselves as *agentic* entrepreneurs through achieving market validation, for informants the significance of finding and seeking growth for a business idea was a common theme in findings. The significance of going through various funding rounds – starting from seed funding, and progressing to rounds A, B, etc. – was demonstrated by informants' comments of their experiences:

> *Informant #4: "I was the only fulltime worker for the first 6 months. In 2018 we had a funding round and 5 fulltime workers. It was an angel investment round with 300,000€ funding from angels and a VC. Nothing so special in that, from December to February … Especially the first funding round in conjunction to running the business was 16h per day, every day for 3 months. Not that this is cool, but this was just the situation. I would like to say that this is always fun and motivating, but it is also pretty rough. But you can move forward very fast and see the results very fast."*

The significance of finding funding and achieving growth as a result of this is evident. By finding funding, the business idea is validated, and a sense of agency may be felt in relation to overcoming challenges and being legitimized by the market as an interesting startup. However, the downsides of pursuing growth and funding are also evident in comments regarding informants' personal lives. While informants may be establishing agency through growth and legitimization as an entrepreneur, this demands total commitment. While growth and success may have been achieved, this required accepting significant limitations regarding the ability to act outside an entrepreneurial field. While achieving

legitimization and agency within entrepreneurship, the structural force of the necessity to pursue funding clearly had major implications on individuals' lives.

The importance of gaining funding and achieving validation through gaining this funding was also present in comments of less agency- and more communion-oriented informants' comments:

> *Informant #3: "I am also part of preparing for a new festival project, we got seed funding and now looking for more funding. The team around the [project] is constantly growing and now we have a lot of top talent in different fields, for example sound design, architecture, movie design. This also makes getting funding easier in the future."*

Even though the festival projects are conceived as the fruits of voluntary labor and passion at work, the realities of working in an entrepreneurial manner and in an entrepreneurial context cannot be avoided. Even creative and largely non-commercial projects need funding, and interestingly informants may use their success in gaining this funding as a way to establish agency or the capacity to navigate entrepreneurial pressures.

4.2.3 The Individualistic Nature of Entrepreneurship

A final theme that emerged from informants interviews was how McAdams' (2001) *agency*-oriented entrepreneurs conceived of entrepreneurship as being fundamentally centered around the individual and the individuals efforts. This was in contrast to more communion-oriented views on entrepreneurship that centered on narratives of entrepreneurship in which collaboration or co-creation formed the basis of informants' entrepreneurial talk. Portrayals of entrepreneurship that focused more on *agency* over *communion* featured themes related to the ability of entrepreneurs to develop themselves and through this achieve success, the significance of overcoming challenges and taking responsibility, as well as the individual or company being the key to achieving success.

These themes again relate broadly to the aspects of agency listed by McAdams et al. (1996). Particularly *achievement/responsibility* characterizes informants talk, as 'getting down to business', overcoming challenges, and bearing responsibility were characterized as being significant in being an entrepreneur, and through this establishing agency. Similarly, the theme of *self-mastery* was prominent in informants portrayals of themselves as entrepreneurs who developed their selves, cultivated their talents, and through this were able to achieve things.

Informants described in their narratives of their development as entrepreneurs processes of learning and self-development, through which they acquired new talents and abilities that let them achieve future goals and successes. These stories portrayed the individual as making use of previous experiences and lessons to exert influence in their current circumstances, either to enable them to pursue growth and success or to enable them to achieve a new role in their startup company.

> *Informant #3: "I've worked on prototyping and product development, the working environment and leading, as well as somewhat on the business and marketing side as well. I have leveraged my experience broadly in different fields. Perhaps my jobs will narrow down if we grow. I have been able to use my skills from broad studies in Aalto."*

Possessing a broad set of skills, and having gone through the process of acquiring these skills, is portrayed as significant in this context in enabling entrepreneurial work. Thus, the process of going through various studies and participating in various projects and endeavors is imbued with an agentic power. In other words, an individual can create agency and the ability to affect their own future by studying, learning, and experiencing broadly. This can be perceived as an effort to cast past experiences in an agentic light, as despite potentially gaining from them in terms of experience, participating in various – possibly unpaid – projects also served as a means to become entrepreneurial. In other words, partaking in various projects may allow for self-development, but partaking is also necessary in order to access entrepreneurial circles, resources, and identities.

Similar ideas regarding the significance of a learning process in becoming an entrepreneur and achieving success are expressed by others:

> *Informant #2: "We started a company with a friend to get 'beer and candy money' through basic website and WordPress projects … In the beginning I was able to specialize my knowledge and work, but now I have been able to focus more on leadership and organizing."*

In this example, a progression from basic coding to more advanced projects is presented as part of becoming an entrepreneur, ultimately leading to the possibility of assuming a more managerial role in the company as it has grown and employed more full-time employees. The significance of developing one's skills is seen as a significant factor in achieving success on both a personal and business level, and therefore in creating agentic capacity for the individual in furthering their own goals. This can be seen in contrast to doubts about what the future of the company may eventually be, and as hedging against future uncertainty.

A continuous process of learning about entrepreneurship and through this enabling oneself to discover new ideas and solutions was also characterized in a similar vein as being significant in being an entrepreneur:

> *Informant #7: "I have been also evaluating startups and ideas on their potential to succeed more on my own time, and try to help things along, for example participating in this interview. This may help in expanding my own borders, and find new solutions that have already existed … I found there is an insurance for CEOs and entrepreneurs, in Finland there are good social safety nets for employees, but not for entrepreneurs. If 90% of startups are supposed to fail. It would be a good thing to provide more safety net for entrepreneurs, especially if you are looking to attract foreign talent."*

The process of constantly seeking to learn new things and develop oneself as an entrepreneur – and through this enable one to have more opportunities in entrepreneurial endeavors – is mentioned as before. At the same time learning about new things like an insurance for entrepreneurs is mentioned in terms not related so much to creating new opportunities, but rather to the ability to hedge against various threats. While learning and developing the self may be portrayed primarily as a method of being agentic and pursuing ones goals, there are also strong elements of seeking to protect oneself from the various uncertainties that face entrepreneurs. Various processes related to learning and developing oneself, such as seeking to continuously learn and try experiences, are then also affected and motivated by external forces and necessities. Continuous learning and self-development may increase an individual's agency, but is in an entrepreneurial environment also a necessity in order to insure against high rates of failure and poor safety nets. An emphasis on the benefits of self-development may to some extent hide that it is simply necessary.

Some more ambivalent attitudes towards the role that self-development has for entrepreneurs are also expressed:

> *Informant #9: "It has been what I expected it to be, I was prepared for this not to be an easy path. You have up- and downturns. The good thing is you had the support where they were showing examples and case studies. For me it was not a surprise when we started this company, as I have seen both good and bad cases. It is important to have knowledge about how things can go."*

While having knowledge of both good and bad cases of entrepreneurship and gaining knowledge regarding what entrepreneurs should do is seen as important, the emphasis of the role of these learnings is not so much on their enabling capacity. There is a clearer focus on both enabling success for entrepreneurs, but also in warning entrepreneurs about the potential pitfalls that face them. Therefore self-development is not portrayed as clearly as a means for an entrepreneur to enable themselves, but also as a necessity due to the nature of entrepreneurial work.

Another theme aside from the role of self-development in entrepreneurship was that of simply taking on challenges, overcoming them, and taking responsibility for doing this. This theme relates quite closely to McAdams et al.'s (1996) theme of *achievement/responsibility*. Some informants emphasized the importance of hard work and persistence in achieving success as an entrepreneur:

> *Informant #4: "I had no previous experience with entrepreneurship before starting this. I was a second year student when I started with no experience in leading a business, so I had so much to learn. Everything was new, so I have been learning a lot. I have liked to learn this, but a lot of work. Sometimes way too much work … I don't want to sound arrogant, but we have just done things our own way, perhaps not the best way, but this is just the way we have done things."*

Previous experience with entrepreneurship is not given as much credit as in previous examples of informants talk, rather the key measure in enabling an individual to become successful personally and through their company is simply hard work. By emphasizing hard work in learning and overcoming challenges as significant in their development and success as an entrepreneur, an individual can lay claim to the source of entrepreneurial success as being within oneself. Through this, an individual can claim agency and the ability to affect ones environment and future despite significant personal pressures mentioned earlier and mentions of the role of supporting networks later. The belief in hard work and 'putting in the hours' that emerges from some informants identity talk may again be contrasted with the reality that many startups fail and that entrepreneurs face significant uncertainty.

The importance in sticking to an idea, working on it, and taking responsibility for a large undertaking can also be seen in other informants' ideas regarding entrepreneurship:

> *Informant #7: "Often in Finland companies are started and sold off when they become slightly larger. Personally I think that companies should hold on for a few more rounds*

before exit, and that society should support this as well. I feel like people think that when things get too big, they get intimidated and want to go back to the team of five guys."

The capacity for the individual to ultimately exert control over their future and opportunities is underlined by the desire to see more entrepreneurs take responsibility for taking their ideas further. A failure to truly 'make it big' by creating a large startup can be attributed partly to the unwillingness of entrepreneurs to commit to an endeavor. This portrays the individual as having agentic capacity in creating a significantly successful company, in contrast to risks and limitations that may be faced by entrepreneurs in achieving this. The failure to grow a startup further may be seen as a personal failing, therefore also placing the initiative to grow as a company and succeed in the hands of the individual. Seeing entrepreneurs as ultimately possessing the agency to make their endeavor successful is again in contrast to the reality that many startups fail, become stagnant, or are purposefully sold off at early stages.

A significant theme that was also expressed by informants was seeing entrepreneurial success clearly as emanating from the individual person and company, as opposed to from a network of collaboration and cooperation. This was expressed fairly directly in some cases:

Informant #2: "Slush, parties, and the carnival do not really contribute to revenue or growth, but I guess it is good to relax and have some entertainment … They will most likely not contribute to business, but at least you get some beer, but moderation in everything."

By rejecting the perceived significance of the environment on the success and opportunities of an entrepreneur, an almost oppositional point of view is taken to communion-oriented informants' conceptions of what being an entrepreneur consists of. This represents something of an extreme view in emphasizing the individual as the master of one's own destiny. The ultimate responsibility for success or failure is placed on the individual, consequently also imbuing the individual with considerable agency.

Assertions towards the supremacy of individual agency are contrasted by how some entrepreneurial events are viewed by the same informant:

Informant #2: "I've also been to Junction before and DASH twice, I haven't really planned to go back. DASH is sort of nice because you get mostly randomly selected into a team,

unlike in Junction where people come from abroad with premade teams and have prepared before, they are quite professional now."

Some events in the entrepreneurial ecosystem are portrayed as being too demanding and intense, requiring significant amounts of time and effort to be successful in. This suggests that assertions regarding the individual ultimately being responsible for their success and being agentic are made in the context of not desiring or being able to pursue opportunities for more collaborative or community-centered entrepreneurial success. Presenting the individual entrepreneur as agentic allows a sense of agency to be created in opposition to these events.

Similar views emphasizing the significance of simply concentrating on one's own work over participating in a broader entrepreneurial community were expressed:

Informant #4: "We haven't used the broader Aalto entrepreneurial ecosystem at all, no accelerators, Kiuas, Startup Sauna, or even Aalto ES. We have been so busy and executing, and we have such a strong board. We had such a clear business plan that we have been just executing since."

The entrepreneurial ecosystem is not portrayed as having played a significant part in the development of the company or individual as entrepreneur. Rather, entrepreneurship and success in entrepreneurial endeavors is cast specifically as originating from individual effort. However, mention is made of events in which the company participated:

Informant #4: "Every month there is some event where we are talking and presenting our business. Ex. recently Hävikkifestarit, some sustainability in Hanken and Haaga-Helia, Prodeko's events. We did some events with Prodeko during Slush, nothing too fancy."

While the company has participated in various events that have given publicity and allowed contact with others in the entrepreneurial arena, these are not presented as the most important factor enabling success. The specific focus on identifying the significant factor of success as residing with the individual display a lack of identification through the entrepreneurial community. This suggests that agency is purposefully placed on the individual's own efforts in contrast to both the previous informant's and most informants' experiences of depending on a broader entrepreneurial ecosystem for success.

One informant makes a more fundamental point regarding the interests of various individuals and entities in the startup world:

> *Informant #7: "Accelerators sometimes assume that just by putting startups together magic will happen through cooperation. But in reality this is not maybe the case. Some accelerators have therefore focused on more targeted segments, and it is still difficult to create cooperation. The strongest incentive for companies who are ultimately very protective of their ideas and information is money, and the potential for mutual validation."*

The entrepreneurial ecosystem in Finland is not seen as being as highly enabling for entrepreneurs as in some accounts, because the various actors in it have no vested financial interest in making the company successful. This point of view explicitly takes the view that the most significant motivators ultimately in entrepreneurship are financial rewards and success. Accordingly, a model of support for startups where parties have a greater financial interest is presented:

> *Informant #7: "Y-Combinator is a hell of a machine gun. It is arrogant to say that this system is better than Y-Combinator, as it is one of the most successful accelerators in the world. It combines access to massive capital as former unicorns or super-unicorns are there. They mess up with your idea and take equity because they really are interested in making your idea massive, and this builds confidence as well. You are not going to get the same level of support from the public sector as there is no direct financial gain."*

This view presents the nature of entrepreneurship as being fundamentally motivated by a desire to achieve market validation and success, in contrast to achieving societal gains or impact as a primary interest. By privileging the interest of the individual in creating success, the significance of the individual in the entrepreneurial world is emphasized. This may serve as a reinforcement to ideas that individuals are ultimately more influential than any one environment or structural constraint, assigning agency to the individual.

5. DISCUSSION

In this section, the findings presented in the previous section will be considered for theoretical implications in context to the theory presented in the literature review. In order to answer the first research question, findings will be discussed in the context of how Consumer Culture Theory research has addressed the identity and identification of individuals, as well as in the context of management and organizational theory research. These latter fields have generally taken a deeper and broader look at what identity and identification consists of, something that will be reflected in light of Consumer Culture Theory research. The role of McAdams (2001) agency/communion modalities in identification will also be considered.

The role that informants' identity talk played in their management of their sense of agency will also be considered, as well as the implications that informants managing strategies have in the context of research on identity talk and discourse.

5.1 Crafting Entrepreneurial Identities through Prototypical Themes

Research on identity in Consumer Culture Theory research has sought to address the manner in which identity can be seen to be created and managed through practices of consumption or marketplace ideologies. Perspectives have ranged from those such as Belk (1988; 2013) which placed strong emphasis on individuals' capacity to proactively and consciously manage and create their identity – thus placing a significant degree of agency within the individual – to perspectives such as Thompson (2004), Arsel and Thompson (2011), or Üstüner and Holt (2007) which stress the significance of structural forces in individuals' identification. Ranging between these are perspectives such as Scott et al. (2017) or Schouten and McAlexander (1995) which position individuals within structural forces but assigning them agency in negotiating and electing between structural influences. In contrast to entrepreneurs being either highly agentic 'masters of their own destinies' or alternatively hopelessly at the mercy of structural forces and discourse, what emerges is an image of entrepreneurs managing the tension of these two overlapping forces – agency and structure. Even perspectives such as Scott et al. (2017) or Schouten and McAlexander (1995) portray individuals as managing their own agency and structural forces largely as a voluntary project in their identity work, in contrast to informants in this study had often gradually committed and drifted into entrepreneurship, or outright been forced into it.

Research from the areas of management and organizational theory have generally taken a more nuanced perspective of what identity work consists of, as outlined by Brown (2017). Similarly, a deeper look at the nature of identity has been presented in these fields of research, as evident in Brown's (2015) summary of identity debates in these fields. The identity work informants engaged in may be broadly, but not necessarily exclusively, categorized as primarily *discursive* (Brown, 2017) and engaging with the *structure/agency* debate regarding identity (Brown, 2015). The discursive and flexible nature of the identity work of informants allows them to manage the structural constraints of entrepreneurial discourse and seek to construct a sense of agency through engaging with discourse regarding entrepreneurship. Through this construction of agency a greater or lesser degree of agency may be realized for a particular entrepreneur.

The identity work undertaken by informants may be characterized to conform to Sveningson and Alvesson's (2003) definition of the concept where "identity work refers to people being engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness". In contrast to perspectives regarding identification present in Consumer Culture Theory research, where identification largely falls within Arnould and Thompson's (2005) streams of consumer identity projects or marketplace ideologies and consumers' interpretative strategies, the range of maneuvers and processes that informants engage in in their identification seems broader. These theoretical perspectives characterize individuals as either agentic in creating their identity as a project, or as influenced by structural forces and discourses in their identification.

Entrepreneurs participating in this study described their motivations for entrepreneurship as stemming from both a desire to fulfill their dreams and passions, as well as from a desire to achieve financial success. Success in entrepreneurship was portrayed alternatively as creating impact or through achieving growth and profits. Similarly entrepreneurs described their entrepreneurial efforts as taking place often either through extensive collaboration or through rigorous focus on their individual effort. Informants rarely stuck to completely to either McAdams (2001) *agency* or *communion* themes, but rather used these themes when appropriate in order to establish themselves as entrepreneurial and agentic. This is in line with Sveningson and Alvesson's (2003) definition of the identification where "identity work refers to people being engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness".

Entrepreneurs engaged in sophisticated processes of working on their identity to fit their needs as entrepreneurs. Additionally, there are indications of narrative elements in informants talk regarding their entrepreneurial endeavors (Brown, 2017), with some individuals particular elaborating extensive stories that positioned their entrepreneurial self within the context of a broader life narrative that has lead them to their current entrepreneurial path.

Informants engaged in sophisticated identity work through their talk of themselves as entrepreneurs, evident in their comments regarding their motivations for entrepreneurship, the measures through which they view success in entrepreneurship, and how they perceive the nature of entrepreneurship on a more fundamental level. The various positions taken by informants on these themes display a range and diversity in positions, both between and within individuals' accounts of their entrepreneurial selves. Informants' identity work and talk is similar to that discussed by Brown (2017) as *discursive* in that it consists of how informants talk about their entrepreneurial self, situated within their context in the entrepreneurial community.

Identity talk evident in informants accounts shows that their identity talk, while possible to characterize in terms of either McAdams (2001) themes of *agency* or *communion*, in practice often included talk falling into both categories. There was a dominance of either *agency* or *communion* in informants' accounts of themselves as generally seeking either *self-mastery*, *achievement/responsibility*, and *status* or *dialogue*, *care/help*, or *community*. However, informants flexibly discussed their entrepreneurial selves and history also in terms of the non-dominant theme, exhibiting a significant degree of flexibility and range in portraying themselves as entrepreneurs, sometimes in seemingly contrasting terms. These contrast were evident for example in individuals accounts of themselves as seeking to fulfill passions and dreams through entrepreneurship, while also discussing their desires or needs to gain financial benefits and validation from their entrepreneurial efforts.

The tendency of interviewed entrepreneurs aligning themselves generally to either an *agency*- or *communion*-oriented view of entrepreneurship may be considered in the context of Fauchart and Gruber's (2011) research on the existence of three prototypical entrepreneurial founder identities: Darwinian, communitarian, and missionary. The Darwinian founder identity overlaps with individualistic and success-oriented informants' descriptions of their work, the communitarian founder identity is similar to some entrepreneurs' view of entrepreneurship as fundamentally collaborative, and

the missionary founder identity is similar to some entrepreneurs' assertions that social impact is significant in their entrepreneurial efforts. The overlap in portrayals of entrepreneurship may be traced much further back, as claimed by Ogbor (2000) in elaborating on ideological bias in entrepreneurship and entrepreneurship research. Ogbor's (2000) analysis of bias in entrepreneurship deals with the bias towards heroic, individualistic, and agentic representations of entrepreneurship, and how they have influenced perceptions of entrepreneurs. This is evident in for example Nicholson and Anderson's (2005) analysis of media portrayals of entrepreneurs. The tendency of informants to characterize themselves as entrepreneurs in either *agency* or *communion* terms may originate, therefore, both in the fundamental nature of *agency* and *communion* as "modalities of human existence" (McAdams, 2001) and in the ideologically charged nature of entrepreneurial discourse and representation. Informants draw their resources for identity work from historical, religious, and mythological origins, as well as their reflections in contemporary society and media. The discourse surrounding entrepreneurship is from a historical perspective one that privileges agency as a mark of successful entrepreneurship, and may explain why agency over structure emerges as the most significant debate regarding identity (Brown, 2015) that informants engage in.

The implications of informants' identity talk and comments on themselves as entrepreneurs may be viewed in relation to the nature of identity as discussed by Brown (2015). The broad debates that exist in management and organizational literature regarding the nature of identity – structure and agency, stability and fluidity, coherence and fragmentation, positive and negative identities, and authenticity and identities – reflect a deeper engagement with the nature of identity than is generally undertaken in Consumer Culture Theory literature. Consequently, the open questions listed by Brown (2015) are rarely explicitly discussed.

The ability of informants to position their identification and identity work flexibly within different general and societal portrayals and discourses of entrepreneurship are indicative of a degree of agency in individuals. The degree to which the flexible and creative nature of informants identity talk constitutes agency within a broader agency vs. structure debate will be discussed in the next section. However, it is apparent that neither the agency of the individual or the influence of structural forces dominates the identification of entrepreneurs, but rather that individuals both exhibit agency in how they seek to see themselves as entrepreneurs, and that they are also influenced by structural forces in the shape of entrepreneurial discourse.

The stability and fluidity of individuals' identification when it comes to entrepreneurial identities seems to be tilted distinctly towards fluidity. Perhaps also due to the nature of entrepreneurship as risky and in constant flux, but also due to the emphasis on fluidity and flexibility in entrepreneurial discourse, informants seem to exhibit considerable fluidity in their identities. This can be seen in both the way that informants gravitate towards the themes of agency and communion selectively and in the fluidity with which informants incorporated their personal narratives and identities from outside the entrepreneurial field into their entrepreneurial selves. This was particularly evident in informants who had gravitated towards entrepreneurship from fields such as education or medicine.

The portrayals of entrepreneurship from informants painted an unrelentingly positive image of entrepreneurship, with negative experiences mentioned in contrast to the benefits and enabling capacity of entrepreneurship. This trend of informants portraying their entrepreneurial identities in a positive light seems to be in line with general trends in identity research that assume a desire to seek a positive identity (Brown, 2015). However, the extent to which this is due to the need to be positive and agentic because these traits are central in entrepreneurial discourse will be discussed in the next section. In general, however, the view of identity that emerges is consistent with Alvesson and Willmott's (2002) conceptualization of identity as fundamentally driving towards a degree of stability, continuity, and coherence.

5.2 Identity Talk as Discursively Constructed Agency

In investigating the role of discourse in the identification, identity work, and talk of informants, Alvesson and Willmott's (2002) list of mechanisms through which discourse may affect an individual is relevant. While this list was created in the context of investigating how organizational elites may affect organization members' identity work, many of the processes seem to be relevant in the case of entrepreneurial discourse as well. For example, there seem to be specific vocabularies of motives present in individuals own talk regarding wanting to be an entrepreneur to follow desires and passions or to achieve success. Informants perceive themselves as entrepreneurial because they seek to use the enabling power of entrepreneurship to either realize their desires and passions or to achieve success in business and develop themselves.

While Alvesson and Willmott (2002) note that discourse is not omnipotent in its ability to influence individuals, Thornborrow and Brown's (2009) description of the simultaneously enabling and limiting capacity of discourse seems highly apt in the case of entrepreneurial discourse. Informants were able to access a wide range of discursive resources in engaging in identity talk, emanating from a significant repository of cultural and social understandings of what entrepreneurship is. Aside from the mythic meanings related to entrepreneurship as discussed by Bird (1992), McMullen (2017), or Sørensen (2008), the entrepreneurial ecosystem and events such as Slush provide powerful images of what entrepreneurship is and what entrepreneurs are like. The mythic representations of entrepreneurship that still affect understandings today such as the ancient Roman and Greek traits of Hermes – appetite, vision, changing direction, fast action, networking – are also strikingly directly represented in entrepreneurial discourse and in informants talk regarding for example the necessity of networking in learning and self-development, finding investments, recruitment, and finding customers.

Thornborrow and Brown's (2009) treatment of discourses as power structures in the context of identity talk is highly relevant in the role that entrepreneurial discourse seems to play to informants. Just as the mechanisms of structure and agency seemed to affect individuals in Thornborrow and Brown's (2009) context, in the case of entrepreneurs the discourse was both enabling and limiting. Entrepreneurial discourse allowed individuals to make use of resources, such as those referenced in relation to Alvesson and Willmott's (2002) mechanisms through which discourses can affect individuals and the role that mythic representations play in entrepreneurship, in order to assume legitimate and flexible identities as entrepreneurs.

The benefit of being able to identify as a legitimate and believable entrepreneur in a social and personal sense is clear given the entrepreneurial context, and the potential uncertainty, doubt, and risks involved in entrepreneurial and startup activity. An individual is able to assert oneself as agentic by aspiring to and achieving legitimacy as an entrepreneur within the entrepreneurial discourse. However, in using resources and positions made available by a discourse in creating an entrepreneurial identity, individuals must become a part of the discourse that they make use of in identification. In seeing discourses as power systems, Thornborrow and Brown's (2009) Foucaultian view of discourse positions the individual as a voluntary participant in accepting and upholding the views regarding a discourse, as well as a monitoring one's own compliance with this discourse. In this point of view, the individual is both agentic in seeking to aspire to an entrepreneurial identity and therefore choosing to

engage in the discourse surrounding entrepreneurship, as well as affected by structural forces in the form of the discourse.

Coupland and Brown's (2015) perspective on discourses as potentially more agentic than in Thornborrow and Brown's (2009) treatment on discourses is also relevant in the context of how entrepreneurs engage in identity work within the context of entrepreneurial discourse. Informants were aware that they participate in a discourse with particular jargon, conventions, and values, even in the case of some informants to the point of questioning or rejecting them. While some informants happily participated in the full spectrum of entrepreneurial events in the ecosystem and readily accepted the message that entrepreneurship is a means of creating change, financial success, or personal growth, others questioned the significance of the entrepreneurial ecosystem and identified limits in how far entrepreneurship could help them. This seems to indicate that at least some informants used entrepreneurial discourse in order to establish agency over structural forces such as financial risk or ontological insecurity, but did this conscious of the limiting side of entrepreneurial discourse as well. Informants were able to consciously and selectively participate in entrepreneurial discourse and the related norms in order to achieve their goals in being an entrepreneur, whether this is to build and sell a company for financial gain, use entrepreneurship as a vehicle for self-discovery, or to escape outside pressures such as financial problems.

While theorists such as Loyal and Barnes (2001) find the concept of agency in contrast to structure to be irrelevant, the nature of the agency possessed or sought by entrepreneurs becomes relevant. Hitlin and Elder (2007) find that there can be an element of self-efficacy in agency. Considering both existential and life agency, a sense of agency may be seen as actually forming agency itself. Removing the identification of entrepreneurs from the agency/structure tension allows viewing the sense of agency that informants possess as creating the agency itself. In other words, because informants have created a sense of agency through identification and discourse, they are in fact agentic. Because entrepreneurial discourse is itself so permeated with notions of unlimited agency, discursively creating a sense of agency is particularly relevant for entrepreneurs. It is not necessarily so relevant what degree of agency they have in regards to imposed structures of entrepreneurial discourse – for example the disappearance of the distinction between personal and professional identity – but rather that they can appear agentic to themselves and others, therefore being entrepreneurial.

Campbell's (2009) distinction between power of agency and agentic power is also a useful in the context of informants identity talk. While possessing agentic power requires the evaluation of to what extent informants' identification and identity talk is affected by discourse and structure, simply establishing that informants have power of agency is more straightforward. While informants may not be able to establish agency over structures – agentic power – being able to make use of discursively available resources in their entrepreneurial identities and entrepreneurial pursuits establishes informants with power of agency. They are able to act as an entrepreneur, in a manner that is entrepreneurial, because they have power of agency. Taking this theoretical perspective discourse may also be perceived as creating agency outside of the agency/structure tension, enabling informants to be agentic within the context of an entrepreneurial discourse.

Identity talk and engagement with discourse by informants may be seen as a method of creating agency for informants, given the already mentioned risks and limitations that entrepreneurs face. Informants construct agency through discourse, enabling them to be agentic.

5.3 Entrepreneurial Discourse and Post-Modernity

The need for individuals situated in an entrepreneurial context to engage in identity work in a process of creating agency has been presented in the previous section; however, this notion has broader societal implications. An increasingly post-modern world that lacks clear career paths and progressions is affected in Watson's (2009a) findings by an increasingly pervasive trend to see entrepreneurship as the main driver and force in society and progress, and to privilege entrepreneurial modes of thought. Watson (2009a) describes how an entrepreneurial discourse has since the 1990's become a dominant discourse that may for example in Alvesson et al.'s (2008) research be seen to coerce employees and organizational members to adopt an entrepreneurial way of thinking. This entrepreneurial way of thinking positions the individual as responsible for their own future and success and nominally agentic, being responsible for creating their own career and earning their place in an organization through providing value and creating new in an entrepreneurial vein.

Such instances of entrepreneurial discourse and values entering into organizational life – or alternatively being imposed on organizational members – are documented by Storey et al. (2005) in

their description of formerly employed media employees being forced or moving into freelance work and Cremin's (2003) account of increasing amounts of personality language in recruiting. Storey et al.'s (2005) research particularly foregrounds the way in which entrepreneurial discourse, but also social structures, are increasingly being affected by entrepreneurialism. Employees who formerly worked for media houses are now freelancers and entrepreneurs, responsible for their own success or failure. While this may be, and was by some informants in Storey et al.'s (2005) study, presented as an enabling change, becoming an entrepreneur was also associated with significant financial and ontological insecurity.

The general trend identified regarding entrepreneurial influence in society and work places into broader societal relevance the way in which informants in this study seek to establish a sense of agency in a highly entrepreneurial context. Entrepreneurial bias such as that identified by Ogbor (2000), as well as entrepreneurial myths that underlie many contemporary biases (Bird, 1992; McMullen, 2017; Sørensen, 2008), will increasingly affect a larger portion of society. People from diverse contexts will have to navigate entrepreneurial discourse and the images that are conveyed regarding entrepreneurship, reflecting McAdams (2001) notion that individuals in contemporary society are faced by pressures to make their identity and identification intelligible in their cultural context by conforming to ideas of what identity is supposed to be, look like, and be presented. This underlines the significance of identifying and addressing images of entrepreneurship that portray entrepreneurship as primarily male, white, and in Western terms, as well as understanding how prototypical portrayals of entrepreneurship rooted deeply in culture affect entrepreneurial discourse, and eventually society.

Additionally, research foregrounding the post-modern context in which many live and engage in identity work such as Bardhi et al. (2012) reflect the increasingly flexible and liquid nature of identification in some contemporary contexts. This reflects entrepreneurial notions of the individual as flexible and always looking to create change, further underlining the significance of understanding how entrepreneurial discourse affects identification and society as an aspect of – and indicative of – post-modernism.

Based on this research, it is possible to at least identify a need for individuals to create agency in the context of both enabling and limiting societal structures and discourse. This need for creating agency brings into focus the side-effects of an increasingly entrepreneurial society, and foregrounds

both the possibilities for fulfilment and success, as well as the instability and tension that follows entrepreneurship.

6. CONCLUSION

This study has investigated the identity work undertaken by entrepreneurs in the Finnish entrepreneurial ecosystem in an effort to both broaden understanding of entrepreneurs' identity work as a relatively unstudied and relevant societal group and to expand on understandings of identification and identity work presented in Consumer Culture Theory research. These goals have been approached through investigating the questions of how entrepreneurs conduct identity work, and whether or how discourse affects their identification.

The nature of identity work performed by entrepreneurs has been presented using McAdams (2001) notions of agency and communion in identification as either a creative, social, and communal pursuit or as a success- and market-driven, individualistic endeavor. The role of entrepreneurial discourse in informants' identity work has been examined in the context of mythical and ideologically charged meanings present in entrepreneurial discourse, and analyzed through the way entrepreneurial discourse privileges and lifts agency as a desirable trait.

The nature of the agency possessed by entrepreneurs has been examined in the context of the broader debate of agency versus structure, and the role that discursively constructed agency plays in informants' identification as entrepreneurs has been explained. By portraying themselves as agentic, informants are able to be credibly entrepreneurial in the context of entrepreneurial discourse.

This has broader societal implications as entrepreneurial discourse spreads and influences an increasingly large and diverse portion of society and organizational work. As more people in society are exposed to entrepreneurial discourse and conduct identity work both enabled and limited by it, and as more employees and workers are encouraged to see themselves as entrepreneurs, the demands that entrepreneurial discourse puts on individual agency become important to understand.

Further research could be conducted to investigate in more depth the nature and role of agency in entrepreneurial discourse, a largely unexplored topic in management and organization literature. While theoretical examination regarding the nature and possession of agency has been made, and entrepreneurial discourse has been researched relatively extensively, this particular aspect of entrepreneurship presents fruitful new perspectives for research.

This study has, however, been made with a limited scope as a Master's thesis, and as such only considers an ultimately small population of predominantly male entrepreneurs in Helsinki. This implies

limitations regarding ‘less mainstream’ forms of entrepreneurship such as entrepreneurship in other cultures, in non-market settings, or in less represented social groups. Additionally, the decision to interpret the source material in line with McAdam’s (2001) notions of *agency* and *communion* necessarily excludes other possible thematic strands present in the material, and by extension potentially present in entrepreneurial discourse.

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